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Bridgend County Borough Council



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Cyfarwyddiaeth y Prif Weithredwr / Chief Executive's Directorate

Deialu uniongyrchol / Direct line /: 01656 643148 / 643147 / 643694

Gofynnwch am / Ask for: Democratic Services

Ein cyf / Our ref:

Eich cyf / Your ref:

Dyddiad/Date: Tuesday, 9 March 2021

Dear Councillor,

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1

A meeting of the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 will be held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Monday, 15 March 2021 at 14:30**.

AGENDA

1. Apologies for Absence
To receive apologies for absence from Members.
2. Declarations of Interest
To receive declarations of personal and prejudicial interest (if any) from Members/Officers in accordance with the provisions of the Members Code of Conduct adopted by Council from 1 September 2008 (including whipping declarations)
3. Approval of Minutes 3 - 10
To receive for approval the minutes of the meeting of 07/12/20
4. Blended Learning in Bridgend Schools since March 2020 11 - 18

Invitees:

Lindsay Harvey - Corporate Director – Education and Family Support
Cllr Charles Smith - Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration
Nicola Echanis - Head of Education and Family Support
Michelle Hatcher - Group Manager Inclusion and School Improvement
Sue Roberts - Group Manager School Improvement
Howard Lazarus - Support and Digital Office Manager

Clara Seery - Managing Director - Central South Consortium
Andrew Williams - Assistant Director for Partnerships and Improvement - Central South Consortium
Natalie Gould - Assistant Director for Curriculum - Central South Consortium
Andy Rothwell - Principal Improvement Partner - Central South Consortium

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Francis Clegg - Headteacher, Archbishop McGrath Catholic High School and Representative of Bridgend Association of Headteachers
Ryan Davies - Headteacher, Brynteg School and Representative of Bridgend Association of Headteachers
Kath John - Headteacher, Brackla Primary School and Chair of Primary Federation
Jeremy Phillips - Headteacher, Litchard Primary School and Vice-Chair of Primary Federation
Neil Pryce - Headteacher, Pil Primary School and Chair of the Bridgend Schools ICT Strategy Group
Bridgend Youth Council and Pupil Representatives

5. Urgent Items

To consider any item(s) of business in respect of which notice has been given in accordance with Part 4 (paragraph 4) of the Council Procedure Rules and which the person presiding at the meeting is of the opinion should by reason of special circumstances be transacted at the meeting as a matter of urgency.

Note: Please note: Due to the current requirement for social distancing this meeting will not be held at its usual location. This will be a virtual meeting and Members and Officers will be attending remotely. The meeting will be recorded for subsequent transmission via the Council's internet site which will be available as soon as practicable after the meeting. If you have any queries regarding this, please contact cabinet_committee@bridgend.gov.uk or tel. 01656 643147 / 643148.

Yours faithfully

K Watson

Chief Officer, Legal, HR & Regulatory Services

Councillors:

T Giffard
JPD Blundell
RJ Collins
M Jones
B Sedgebeer
J Gebbie

Councillors

SK Dendy
AJ Williams
KJ Watts
PA Davies
RME Stirman
JH Tildesley MBE

Councillors

TH Beedle
A Williams
KL Rowlands
SE Baldwin

Registered Representatives

Tim Cahalane - Roman Catholic Church
Rev. Canon Edward Evans - Church in Wales
Ciaron Jackson - Primary School Sector
Lynsey Morris – Secondary School Sector

Agenda Item 3

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.

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

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

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

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR EDUCATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

BLENDED LEARNING IN BRIDGEND SCHOOLS SINCE MARCH 2020

15 MARCH 2021

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 (SOSC1) in respect of blended learning approaches that have developed across Bridgend schools and its pupil referral unit since the beginning of the school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020.

2. Connection to corporate wellbeing objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate wellbeing objectives under the **Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:

Supporting a successful sustainable economy - taking steps to make the county borough a great place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focussed on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions for all people in the county borough.

Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.

Smarter use of resources - ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's wellbeing objectives.

3. Background

- 3.1 Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) commissions Central South Consortium (CSC) to provide a school improvement service on behalf of the local authority (LA). The LA and CSC have developed a close and effective working relationship which has proved to be beneficial in supporting schools since the start of school closures caused by Covid-19.
- 3.2 CSC has primarily been responsible for supporting schools in their approach to blended and remote learning. The support and guidance provided has aligned with Welsh Government guidance and has drawn on expert input from a range of sources including academic research.

- 3.3 Throughout the pandemic period an important feature of work conducted by CSC has been to listen to what schools have reported about their experiences and that of their learners and to shape support accordingly. The 'roadmap' developed by CSC encourages schools to use parent and learners' feedback at regular intervals to reflect on their remote and blended learning offer. Most schools have drawn on this information and modified their approaches.
- 3.4 While there have been many changes to how CSC supports schools, the core work of the consortium remains the same and has continued throughout the pandemic. On behalf of the LA, CSC provides:
- an improvement partner (formerly known as a challenge adviser) linked to every school;
 - a Welsh in Education Officer to every school;
 - the Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) Programme;
 - the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH);
 - professional learning for all school-based staff at all stages of their career (including all leadership programmes);
 - extensive professional learning linked to emerging school priorities;
 - extensive professional learning linked to national priorities (eg intensive support for the development of the Curriculum for Wales); and
 - oversight of grant-funded activity.
- 3.5 In the early stages of the school closure period (ie from March to July 2020), schools were operating as childcare hubs for the children of key workers and for those children identified as being particularly vulnerable. The prime focus of schools at that time was to ensure the safeguarding and wellbeing of all pupils.
- 3.6 The close partnership working between schools, the Education and Family Support Directorate and Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate ensured that the most vulnerable pupils were identified and offered on-site places or where pupils were eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and not attending on site food parcels were delivered by support staff as a means to check on their wellbeing. As Estyn noted, 'The multi-disciplinary teams worked in an integrated way to support families with vulnerable children and young people. These teams were well placed to work collaboratively and provide support through the pandemic'.
- 3.7 During this period, schools developed work packs for pupils and began to shift to providing materials online to facilitate learning and assist parents/carers in the support they were able to offer their children. This involved a vast upskilling exercise to assist teachers and pupils in the transformation to remote teaching and learning.
- 3.8 On 10 June 2021, a virtual conference, coordinated by Bridgend County Borough Council and led by Dr Gareth Lanagan (E-sgol Coordinator, Ceredigion County Council) was attended by all Bridgend school headteachers, senior officers from the Education and Family Support Directorate, and Central South Consortium colleagues. Dr Lanagan offered insights into the long-term uses of remote and blended learning and discussed a range of strategic and operational issues to support online learning in the future. Following this event, professional development sessions with school staff have been offered, in recognition of the fact that blended

learning will continue to form part of a balanced 21st century approach to teaching and learning, beyond Covid.

- 3.9 In September 2020, with the support of the local authority, schools produced business resilience plans to help them cope with potential further disruption to learning caused by the need for cohorts of pupils and staff to self-isolate. In these plans, schools identified the need to develop and refine their approaches to blended learning ensuring that staff had the necessary ICT equipment and skills to be able to offer continuity of learning.
- 3.10 By the second lockdown period (from November 2020), schools were better placed to increase their emphasis on remote and blended learning. Operating in line with Welsh Government and trade union guidance (supported by the local authority) regarding safeguarding online for pupils and staff, schools predominantly offered asynchronous (recorded) lessons online via Hwb (the all-Wales online learning platform provided by Welsh Government). Synchronous ('live-streaming') of lessons was limited by the e-safety/safeguarding requirement to have two members of staff involved at all times and by the fact that this could only be done on a voluntary basis; teachers could not be compelled to offer 'live-streaming'.
- 3.11 Schools and the local authority faced increasing demands from some parents for live-streamed/synchronous lessons to meet the needs of their children, particularly for older pupils involved in examination classes where there existed much anxiety. However, for others (especially key workers who were not home to support their children during school hours) synchronous lessons did not provide the flexibility/accessibility they needed. Using this feedback and the CSC 'roadmap', schools continue to adapt their response to offer a more blended approach. Schools received feedback from pupils and parents some expressing concern about the volume of work being provided as some pupils (particularly those in examination classes) were being given far more work than if they were in school and were feeling overwhelmed by it.
- 3.12 The need for schools to be open for some pupils presents a challenge for delivery for teachers when they are delivering direct face-to-face teaching while concurrently producing resources that can be accessed via remote learning. It is not possible to provide online synchronous lessons at the same time as being responsible for pupils on site. For that reason, schools have operated on a rota basis to try to help manage teachers' workload.

4. Current situation/proposal

- 4.1 Since schools reopened after the initial lockdown, the quality of blended learning has become more of a focus for schools, the LA, CSC and for Estyn. In November 2020, CSC conducted a 'deep dive' review into research about remote and blended learning and found that the quality of teaching is more important than 'how' it is delivered. This has influenced schools in the local authority in their approaches to remote and blended learning as it continues to evolve.
- 4.2 In January 2021, Welsh Government guidance changed, placing a greater expectation on schools to provide synchronous lessons, without the need for two members of staff to be present. This has resulted in many schools offering timetabled sessions for pupils where there is an opportunity for wellbeing/pastoral

check-ins as well as for direct instruction and feedback from the teacher who is available online, sometimes via live chat rather than live video streaming. Provision has evolved in trying to find the optimum session length and optimum activities to motivate the pupils and not require them to be working at the screen continually. Schools have been encouraged to share their experiences with one another and there is currently a social media campaign on Twitter where schools are helping to identify their posts about remote and blended learning by adding the marker #BridgendBL.

- 4.3 As outlined by Estyn, 'Officers from local authorities and regional consortia used the initial lockdown period to engage with national and international research, to identify effective practice to share with schools. In Bridgend, school improvement partners collated evidence about learning from the Education Endowment Foundation (2020) whose findings include that the quality of teaching is more important than how it is delivered. This has helped schools in the local authority to think about their approaches to distance and blended learning.'
- 4.4 To assist schools in their management of information and to adapt their practice to the evolving circumstances, the most recent CSC document released in January 2021 compiled the Welsh Government guidance and expectations alongside best practice case-studies. Overall, the message remains consistent that schools are best placed to decide on the model of remote and blended learning. All guidance and evidence clearly highlights that how blended learning is delivered is not as important as the quality of teaching. It also reflects the findings from a range of learner voice activities including recent research conducted by the Children's Commissioner for Wales.
- 4.5 The Education and Family Support Directorate has placed great importance on using evidence from research (eg from the Children's Commissioner for Wales) and on seeking the views of parents and learners about their experiences during lockdown. These views have been gathered from a range of sources, including a parental survey (June 2020), meeting with the Bridgend Youth Council and with a sixth-form student from Brynteg School who had undertaken his own survey of students across Wales. The findings (outlined below) have helped to shape and refine ongoing developments to practice.
- 4.6 Bridgend Youth Council members met with the Corporate Director Education and Family Support to discuss online, remote and blended learning (January 2021). Bridgend Youth Council raised three concerns around online, remote and blended learning across Bridgend. These were:
- an inconsistent approach to remote teaching and learning by schools;
 - student wellbeing, as the workload has increased through remote teaching and learning but teacher support has decreased, leading to many young people experiencing stress, anxiety and a drop in their general wellbeing; and
 - digital poverty, there has been an increase in requests to schools to provide students with devices, when schools have a limited supply.

- 4.7 Bridgend Youth Council members also identified some of the advantages of online and blended learning such as:
- freedom to structure their day around their current personal routines;
 - more time to contact and communicate with peers and friends regarding school work and issues they may be having;
 - some schools providing wellbeing packs to students; and
 - an increase in young people’s digital literacy skills leading to a greater willingness and confidence to join in online groups such as Bridgend Youth Council as the prospect of online socialisation and meetings ‘wasn’t as scary anymore’.
- 4.8 A pro-active sixth-form student from Brynteg School who had conducted a nation-wide survey in December 2020 was invited to present his findings to all Bridgend headteachers along with some elected members and LA/CSC officers at a recent Team Bridgend meeting.
- 4.9 The student alluded to the concern felt by many students in relation to the timing of the return to school after Christmas where many feared returning too soon and potentially risk spreading the virus to family members. He also identified the worry among students in examination classes about the forms of assessment and examinations being suggested. He also raised some concerns related to remote and blended learning, recognising the difficulty schools face in trying to develop an appropriate and balanced remote and blended learning offer. By the time that these findings were shared, Welsh Government had addressed each of the concerns raised with their decision that schools would not re-open immediately after the Christmas break, their announcement about changes to examinations/assessment and their change to the guidance about synchronous online teaching and learning.
- 4.10 The briefing from the Children’s Commissioner for Wales, ‘Getting online: barriers and successes for the provision of online learning during the January 2021 Tier 4 lockdown’ concluded:
- ‘Social factors are hugely important in understanding the barriers to engaging children and young people in online learning. Many parents lack time, skills, confidence or even physical space to have all of their children learning at once via ‘live’ lessons, in addition to challenges of shared devices, lack of data and poor connections. Some families are reported to not engage at all in online learning and there will be many factors associated with that. There are frustrations about ‘live’ teaching being expected by the public and media as a ‘gold standard’ when it is only one tool for effective learning at this time.’
- 4.11 Schools have been encouraged to share their remote and blended learning experiences and pupil work via the social media platform, Twitter using #BridgendBL. Schools have responded enthusiastically with more than 2,500 posts, many of which have subsequently been shared by BCBC and CSC social media platforms.

- 4.12 Following self-evaluation processes, supported by CSC improvement partners, schools are beginning to rapidly change their learning offer, reflecting feedback and changing Welsh Government guidance. It is expected that schools will continue to undertake self-evaluation and improvement activities. The LA and CSC remain in regular contact with schools and are on hand to support.
- 4.13 The Children’s Commissioner’s briefing report demonstrates that across Wales:

‘A digital divide remains in Wales for learners, although this is much more significant in some schools and colleges than others. While huge efforts have been made at a national, local authority and school or college level to get devices and data/MiFi to learners there remains some frustration at the supply of devices after need has been established many months before’.
- 4.14 In line with the BCBC Schools’ ICT Strategy and supported by the local authority’s central ICT team, schools have ordered over 6,500 devices through the Welsh Government Hwb programme in the last year. Although there have been nation-wide delays, with equipment ordered in July 2020 only arriving in February 2021, all devices will be received by the end of this financial year.
- 4.15 Corporately, in January 2021, BCBC supplied finance for 500 laptops for digitally excluded learners to help with digital provision during the second lockdown. As blended learning became more prevalent during the second lockdown, schools identified a greater requirement for devices and internet access for digitally excluded learners. Over 2,000 learners have been helped during this current lockdown. This includes the provision of 300 MiFi units for home internet access. Schools continue to work towards increasing the mobile device to learner ratio.
- 4.16 In the thematic review for ‘LA and consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to Covid-19’ conducted in the latter end of the autumn term 2020, Estyn recognised that the clear communication offered by the local authority’s ‘Team Bridgend’ approach helped to support the development of remote and blended learning as well as ensuring the safeguarding of vulnerable pupils and protecting the wellbeing of learners and staff.
- 4.17 In the week commencing 22 February 2021, all pupils in the foundation phase returned to face-to-face teaching (this included nursery-aged pupils) alongside the on-site provision for those identified as vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers. This presents an ongoing challenge to teachers in their efforts to continue to offer online/blended learning alongside their face-to-face teaching, and will require careful management.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

- 5.1 There is no impact on the Council’s policy framework or procedure rules.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 There are no direct equality impact issues arising from this report.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

7.1 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 Assessment provides a comprehensive summary of the outcomes expected from the implementation of the service.

Long-term	Supports the continuity of learning and the improvement of standards and outcomes in schools.
Prevention	Monitoring schools' remote and blended learning offer allows the local authority to identify areas of good practice to be shared to help raise standards and to identify areas for school development via consortia and local authority support, helping to ensure that recommendations identified are addressed and acted upon to secure continuity of learning, preventing standards from slipping.
Integration	Monitoring and acting upon the overall remote and blended learning offer is key to ensuring that outcomes for schools are achieved thus helping students achieve, thus supporting a successful economy.
Collaboration	The local authority listens to learners and works closely with schools, Estyn and with the Central South Consortium (CSC) to deliver the wellbeing objectives related to school improvement. The local authority receives reports from CSC and this informs the work conducted by CSC to deliver the support required for remote and blended learning.
Involvement	This area of work involves all stakeholders in school improvement, including learners. The local authority works closely with CSC to identify strategic areas for improvement and on how best to support schools. Schools work closely with improvement partners from CSC to refine their remote and blended learning offer and to identify strategic support from the local authority, CSC and elsewhere (as required) reflecting the diversity of stakeholders involved in aspects of school improvement.

8. Financial implications

8.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this information report.

9. Recommendation

9.1 The Committee is recommended to note the content of this report.

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March 2021

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Background documents

Estyn review of the period after the initial lockdown (June-November 2020, published on 15 January 2021) Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to Covid-19

https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-01/LA%20consortia%20support%20for%20schools%20and%20PRUs%20en_3.pdf

Children's Commissioner for Wales's briefing report: 'Getting online: barriers and successes for the provision of online learning during the January 2021 Tier 4 lockdown'

[GettingOnline_ENG_270121.pdf \(childcomwales.org.uk\)](#)