

# 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 nationwide 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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## **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](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 \(childcomwales.org.uk\)](#)