



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 20/21

CABINET

18th OCTOBER 2021

UPDATE ON THE EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS AND PRUS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES IN
DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER (COUNCILLOR MRS J
ROSSER)**

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All through sector)**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide Cabinet with an overview of the progress Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority has made in relation to recommendations from the overarching thematic report Estyn published in January 2021.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Consider Estyn's letter on the Council's work to support schools to provide a quality provision during 2020-21.
- 2.2 Consider whether they require further information to be provided in any future meetings.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To provide Members with an update on Estyn reviews of the critical actions taken by

the Education and Inclusion Services Directorate during 2020-21.

4. **BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 During the early autumn term of 2020, the Welsh Government asked Estyn to undertake a review of local authorities' work in supporting their learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period from March to October 2020. Estyn's thematic report 'Local Authority and Regional Consortia Support for Schools and PRUs in Response to COVID-19' was published in January 2021.
- 4.2 The thematic review of practice across all 22 local authorities across Wales identified five recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider and recognised that a whole system approach was needed to address these. These recommendations are summarised as follows:
- **Recommendation 1:** Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity.
 - **Recommendation 2:** Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs.
 - **Recommendation 3:** Develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free school meals.
 - **Recommendation 4:** Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils.
 - **Recommendation 5:** Create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design.

The full report, can be accessed via the following link:

[Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 | Estyn \(gov.wales\)](#)

The first three recommendations were immediate and urgent in nature, whilst time would be needed to address the last two fully.

- 4.3 The report is based on virtual meetings with senior LA and Central South Consortium officers and the Cabinet Lead Member for Education and Inclusion Services; a meeting with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council; and engagement calls with a significant number of schools and PRUs across the local authority.
- 4.4 Consideration was also given to supporting documentation and evidence provided to Estyn link inspectors by senior local authority officers and the feedback from surveys

of schools/PRU leaders, governors, teachers and support staff, parents and pupils during engagement visits throughout the autumn term.

5. UPDATE/CURRENT POSITION

In respect to the following five recommendations, Estyn identified many strengths as well as some areas of development.

5.1 Recommendation 1: Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity.

Estyn positively referenced the following:

- The local authority worked well with schools to identify further barriers to learning following on from the useful support provided during the early stages of the pandemic.
- Officers used data well to plan their approaches strategically, which included the data systems developed by the local authority to identify the exact needs of digitally excluded pupils to support better strategic planning and more targeted support.
- The Attendance and Wellbeing Service Officers, Family Engagement Officers and school staff supported families well by acting as a conduit between home and school to overcome barriers to learning.
- The local authority encouraged schools to adapt their offer and to take better account of the views of parents. In addition, the local authority communicated regularly with families to help parents and carers to support their children's learning.

5.2 Recommendation 2: Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs.

Estyn positively referenced the following:

- Officers from the local authority gathered a suitable range of first-hand evidence and listened to the views of parents and pupils, helping them to identify need and plan support accordingly. Estyn noted that schools reported they valued this approach and the support offered.
- The local authority and regional consortium worked closely to provide information and advice on distance and blended learning strategies.
- Over the course of the pandemic, the local authority has developed a useful tracking system to monitor pupil engagement.

5.3 Recommendation 3: Develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free school meals.

Estyn positively referenced the following:

- Effective use of digital technology and management information systems across the authority that has enabled data to be analysed to evaluate the progress and engagement of vulnerable groups of learners.
- The close working relationship between services and agencies to develop joint guidance to identify the best support for those most in need.
- The local authority has continued to support pupils' Welsh language skills by providing bilingual services and guidance for schools and families.

5.4 Recommendation 4: Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils.

Estyn positively referenced the following:

- The authority's awareness that the pandemic significantly impacted on the mental health of many groups of children and young people.
- The data team's support for schools to identify specific groups or cohorts of learners disproportionately affected by school closures.
- Staff in the Attendance and Wellbeing Service work with schools identifying wellbeing needs and supporting effective safeguarding of pupils.
- The authority has procured a software package to manage and record all safeguarding concerns across all schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- The development of the local authority data 'dashboard' to identify trends in safeguarding, and the work of Bronze command, giving a wider strategic view of safeguarding needs.
- The Education Psychology Service has established a helpline to support families, early years' settings, agencies, and schools.'

5.5 Recommendation 5: Create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design.

Estyn positively referenced the following:

- The local authority feels that partnership working with schools is strong. They consider that the local authority and schools are one team with shared aims and ambitions.
- Cross directorate working in Rhondda Cynon Taf has always been considered a positive feature by officers, and they now believe it has been further strengthened during the pandemic.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not currently required - the contents of the report are for information purposes only.

7. CONSULTATION

7.1 There is no requirement to undertake any consultation.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 8.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 9.1 There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

10. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP

- 10.1 This is an information report presenting the overview of progress made by the local authority in relation to recommendations from the thematic report published in January 2021 by Estyn to Welsh Government which outlines how the Council is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report is clearly connected to one of the priorities in the Council's corporate plan 2020- 2024 that is:

- Creating **Places:** *where people are proud to live, work and play;*

Within this priority one of the Council's commitments is to ensure it has "*good schools so all children have access to a great education*".

11. CONCLUSION

- 11.1 It is hoped that the report provides Cabinet Members with details about the recent feedback provided by Estyn and insight into the progress the local authority has made against the recommendations made in Estyn's thematic report published January 2021.
- 11.2 The local authority will continue to work in close partnership with the regional School Improvement Service and all its schools to ensure that strong progress is made against all the recommendations identified by Estyn in the thematic report.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972
AS AMENDED BY
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
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Background Papers: none

Officer(s) to contact:

Tim Britton, Head of Achievement (Primary sector)

Sarah Corcoran, Head of Achievement and Well-being (Secondary and All through sector)

APPENDIX 1:

Estyn's overview of the progress made by Rhondda Cynon Taf in relation to recommendations from the overarching thematic report published January 2021. The detail is an extract from a letter to the Chief Executive of the Council.

Recommendation 1 – Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity.

The local authority conducted a stakeholder survey to identify all barriers to learning including digital concerns. They worked closely with schools to record details of the pupils in need of devices and distributed an additional 2,500 laptops and tablets to local families. Officers used data well to plan their approaches strategically. From their analyses, they observed that pupils eligible for free school meals make up only around half of the pupils that are digitally excluded. The data systems developed by the local authority identify the exact needs of digitally excluded pupils to support better strategic planning and more targeted support.

The attendance and wellbeing service officers, family engagement officers and school staff have supported families well be acting as a conduit between home and school to overcome barriers to learning. For example, they have delivered devices for families with transport issues, provided doorstep tuition on digital skills and techniques, reset passwords, and have helped families to understand how to use games consoles and tablets to access online learning platforms. In consultation with schools and in light of their experiences during the pandemic, the local authority is further developing their existing digital strategy. This will align with the Welsh Government's Hwb EdTech Infrastructure Project to provide a sustainable digital education infrastructure for the local authority.

Other than access to technology, officers identified the main barriers to learning to be the variability of engagement in live lessons and the fatigue of parents and pupils. They have encouraged schools to adapt their offer and to take better account of the views of parents. In addition, the local authority communicated regularly with families to help parents and carers to support their children's learning. They explained how they were supporting schools to work with families to provide a flexible approach to learning including consideration of the timing and number of live lessons. The local authority has also organised the deployment of teaching assistants to act as supportive adults for older pupils where appropriate.

Recommendation 2 – Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs.

During the spring term 2021, local authority officers continued to work with the regional consortia and school leaders to review and refine distance and blended learning provision.

Improvement partners from the regional consortium used key questions to identify which schools were progressing well with blended and distance learning, and those that needed

additional support. Officers from the local authority also gathered a suitable range of first-hand evidence and listened to the views of parents and pupils. This helped them to identify need and plan support offered.

In addition to gathering first-hand evidence and returning more recently to work reviews and lesson observations, the local authority and regional consortium have used a wider range of approaches to gather evidence about the quality of blended learning from schools. For example, to evaluate the quality of distance learning and how responsive the school was to the needs and preferences of the pupils, improvement partners observed an online meeting with pupils at Penrhys Primary School. In addition, the improvement partner at Ysgol Nant Gwyn observed initial teacher education students talking about their experiences of contributing to a distance learning package for learners. The local authority considers learner voice to be a priority and even more so post Covid-19. At Maerdy Community Primary School the improvement partner hosted a virtual meeting with learners to evaluate learning.

The local authority and regional consortium have worked closely to provide information and advice on distance and blended learning strategies during the most recent lockdown period. Strengths of provision have been captured in a series of case studies and this has facilitated the sharing of good practice. In general, schools have valued the useful training opportunities and webinars provided by the regional consortium to help staff to develop further their approaches to blended learning. To support governors to improve the challenge they provide to schools about learners' distance learning experiences, the cluster of Welsh-medium schools held joint governor meetings and engaged governors in an example live lesson. This helped governors to understand the logistics of online teaching and be better informed when making decisions.

Over the course of the pandemic, the local authority has developed a useful tracking system to monitor pupil engagement. Engagement measures have been further refined to include the quality of the work, as well as the completion of tasks. In addition, schools are supported well to make effective use of the family engagement officers.

Recommendation 3 – Develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free schools meals.

Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority has developed its systems to capture and use data well during the past year. Local authority officers have collected information from a varied range of sources to help identify vulnerable pupils that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The effective use of digital technology and management information systems across the authority has enabled data to be analysed to evaluate the progress and engagement of vulnerable groups of learners. Officers have worked closely with children's services and the health board to develop joint guidance to identify the best support for those most in need. This guidance, along with the up-to-date pupil information provided to schools, has helped to ensure targeted and swift support has been in place.

To support schools with the use of the additional funding for pupils whose skills development has been affected by the pandemic, the local authority and regional consortium has put in place a range of professional learning opportunities and guidance. This includes the sharing of good practice, webinars, repositories of resources, and school-to-school support. In addition, the heads of department network meetings for secondary schools have continued to ensure that support at middle leader level focuses appropriately on identifying and addressing skills' deficit. School leaders have reported to officers and to Estyn during engagement calls that although reading skills have been maintained overall, pupils' listening and speaking skills and basic number skills have generally regressed. In addition, some schools feel that there has been a deterioration in pupils' levels of concentration and physical fitness. In order to improve pupils' literacy skills, the local authority has begun to develop school and cluster-based groups to consider how best to progress these skills. Although at an early stage, these groups are jointly developing research-informed initiatives aimed at improving outcomes in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The local authority has continued to support pupils' Welsh language by providing bilingual services and guidance for schools and families. All social media posts and graphics are also issued bilingually. In addition, they are increasing the capacity for Welsh-medium education within the authority as part of their longer-term strategic planning.

Recommendation 4 – Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils.

The authority is aware that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of any groups of children and young people. For example, they recognise that post-16 learners' engagement and attendance is a cause for concern. As a result, their well-being action plan aims to build capacity of schools to meet the emotion and mental health and well-being needs of learners. Whole school training in approaches to anxiety, cognitive behaviour therapy, and staff well-being has been developed and accessed widely by practitioners.

Schools are supported by the data team to identify specific groups or cohorts of learners that have been disproportionately affected by school closures. For instance, they provide regular updated local authority reports and live data on vulnerable groups. The vulnerable groups include those pupils on the child protection register, children in need of care and support, young carers, children who are looked after and those with statements of special educational needs. The accessibility of data ensures that schools are informed quickly of learners whose personal circumstances have been challenging and may have changed. This, in turn, triggers enhanced well-being calls by the school and, where necessary, access to specialist services and support, such as the Attendance and Well-being Service, Youth Engagement and Participation Service, Resilient Families Service and the Educational Psychology Service.

Staff in the Attendance and Well-being Service work with schools on a rota basis to ascertain wellbeing needs and to support the effective safeguarding of pupils. They refer learners and families directly to the most appropriate service area. In addition, the authority has

procured a software package to manage and record all safeguarding concerns across all schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf. This, in conjunction with the further development of the local authority data 'dashboard' which identifies the trends in safeguarding, and the work of Bronze command (the multi-agency safeguarding group), gives a wider strategic view of safeguarding needs within the local authority.

The Education Psychology Service has established a helpline to support families, early years' settings, agencies and schools. The helpline has supported over 300 families during the first and second lockdowns and continues to be used widely. General themes that have emerged recently relate to anxiety due to lockdown, an increase in challenging behaviour at home, concerns regarding school transition and advice to support pupils who have experienced bereavement during lockdown. In addition, training has been provided for schools to establish a general measure of well-being for pupils and staff. This is enabling schools to identify trends and respond to specific well-being needs of individual pupils and classes or to respond to whole-school issues.

A number of multi-agency working groups have been established to support the well-being of particular groups of people. For example, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, LGBTQ+ and wellbeing of these groups will be evaluated as they become more established.

As restrictions have eased, the local authority has tried to ensure that pupils are offered food of the correct nutritional value. Breakfast clubs are operating and generally schools have changed their menus to encourage healthy eating.

Recommendation 5 - Create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design.

Officers' report that the changes brought about by the pandemic have made them reflect on their practices and ways of working. They feel that there are many features that they will continue to implement in the future. For example, they intend to continue with the improvements to work digitally across the local authority, within schools, and between them, and ensure this is embedded in day to day practice.

The local authority feels that partnership working with schools is strong. They consider that the local authority and schools are one team with shared aims and ambitions. Generally, schools agree. School leaders report that they are happy to contact the local authority officers to seek advice. In addition, the local authority is more confident to seek feedback about their services from all stakeholders.

Cross directorate working in Rhondda Cynon Taf has always been considered a positive feature by officers, and they now believe it has been further strengthened during the pandemic. For example, the head of Human Resources and the Director of Public Health and Protection have attended headteacher meetings. This facilitated joint problem-solving and the co-construction of solutions to challenges posed by the pandemic. This supported timely decisions with fewer misunderstandings between schools and the local authority.

The local authority feels that a strength of its team throughout the pandemic is the quality and frequency of its communications with schools and the wider community. Leaders feel that the use of social media to communicate with stakeholders has been strong. Although the use of data is viewed as a strength of the local authority, officers intend to improve the way that this is shared. For example, they plan to share it via the local authority website. They feel this will make it easier for parents to find the additional information.

Opportunities for governors to engage with training has improved during the pandemic. Distance learning modules were offered on topics such as the Curriculum for Wales, additional learning needs and paediatric first aid. This, along with regular termly meetings to consider high level priorities, has resulted in a larger number of governors accessing training and improving the way they work. The local authority will continue to offer a hybrid approach to governor training in the future.