



## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MUNICIPAL YEAR 20/21**

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2021**

**UPDATE OF EDUCATION'S LATEST POSITION IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES**

### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To provide members of the Children and Young People's Committee with some contextual information on the most recent changes in Education in response to the ever changing COVID-19 position. This will support the verbal update provided by the Director of Education and Inclusion Services in the meeting.

### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Consider the verbal update from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services on the Council's most recent responses to Ministerial announcements in relation to the escalating COVID-19 situation.
- 2.2 Consider whether they wish the Director of Education and Inclusion Services to report on further information in any future meetings.

### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To provide Members with an update on the critical actions taken by the Council as a result of recent announcements made by the Education Minister and the recent escalation in lockdown measures.
- 3.2 To update Members of the current COVID-19 processes and practices in Rhondda Cynon Taf schools and to ensure that they are kept abreast of all developments.

#### **4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 On the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, the Chief Medical Officer for Wales recommended that all mainstream secondary schools (including years 7-13 in all-through settings) should be closed to all learners, with the exception of the most vulnerable, from Monday the 14<sup>th</sup> of December, with secondary learners, other than the most vulnerable, being able to access remote and distance learning between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2020.
- 4.2 The last day of physical attendance at Rhondda Cynon Taf's infant, junior, primary, special schools and pupil referral units was to be Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> of December (with the exception of the most vulnerable learners).
- 4.3 On 11<sup>th</sup> of December, Welsh Government directed all local authorities to also make urgent provision for the children of critical workers of primary aged children (and secondary age for special schools) during the last week of term.
- 4.4 Wales entered Alert Level 4 on 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2020.
- 4.5 Following meetings between Directors of Education across Wales and Welsh Government Officials on the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020, further directions were issued to schools. Schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf were advised to allocate Monday 4<sup>th</sup> of January and Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> of January as planning days to enable all schools to update risk assessments and prepare for the delivery of remote learning for the majority of pupils. Schools were also required to update their Business Continuity Plans to ensure that they were well-placed to deal with any eventuality from a COVID-19 emergency planning perspective. Schools were also advised to provide face to face learning for high priority vulnerable learners and the children of eligible critical workers from Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> of January onwards.

#### **5. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE ESCALATION IN NATIONAL RESTRICTIONS**

- 5.1 On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, Welsh Government announced that due to continuing increases in cases and the presence of a new coronavirus variant which is far more infectious, Wales was to remain in Alert Level 4 and the decision making on schools was to fall in line with the Welsh Government's three-week review timetable of 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. As a direct result of this change, schools were advised to continue with remote learning until at this date. The majority of learners continue to learn remotely with vulnerable children and children of critical workers having access to on-site provision along with learners undertaking essential exams and assessments.
- 5.2 Welsh Government are keen to emphasise that the closure of schools to the majority of learners is not because schools are now more unsafe or pose a higher risk for teachers and children, it is because the new variant is far more infectious and keeping schools open does encourage children and adults to mix – inside and

outside the school gates – at a time when cases of coronavirus are high across Wales and with evidence of a very infectious strain spreading quickly in key areas.

- 5.3 Welsh Government have stated that unless the rates of community transmission in Wales reduce significantly by the 29<sup>th</sup> of January, most learners in Wales will continue working remotely until the February half-term. The Council has regular communication with Welsh Government and awaits their further announcement in this regard.

## **6. EDUCATIONAL PROVISION**

The Local Authority continues to work very closely with all of our schools and provide advice and guidance to school staff as well as regular updates to parents/carers (see section 7 below).

### **6.1 All Learners (Excluding the Children of High Priority Critical Workers/Vulnerable Learners)**

Remote learning provision has been in place for the majority of learners from the 14<sup>th</sup> of December (for secondary schools) and the 16<sup>th</sup> of December for all other schools.

Remote learning allows pupils to continue accessing the curriculum beyond the classroom. It allows them to learn through a guided study programme set by their teachers. A remote learning task could be a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities.

Schools across Rhondda Cynon Taf are implementing a variety of remote learning options with support from the local authority's school improvement officers and colleagues at the Central South Consortium. Welsh Government's Hwb digital platform for learning and teaching also provides a wealth of educational resources for schools, parents/carers and learners.

### **6.2 Critical Worker Provision**

Provision for critical workers is available throughout the current Level 4 lockdown period for eligible children of all ages in primary, special school and pupil referral unit settings. In mainstream secondary schools, this provision is made available for mainstream learners in years 7 and 8 only, and for the children of critical workers attending key stage 3 and 4 learning support class provisions only.

Having paid due regard to Welsh Government information, critical workers within Rhondda Cynon Taf, includes:

- Health and social care workers;
- Public safety (emergency workers) and national security workers;
- Education and childcare workers;
- Food and other necessary goods workers (entitlement from the 18<sup>th</sup> of January).

In accordance with Welsh Government's advice, only **one** parent/carer needs to be a critical worker to access this provision. Where space allows and learners can be safely accommodated on school sites, schools must pay due regard to all the critical worker categories identified by Welsh Government.

### 6.3 **Vulnerable Learner Provision**

Education and Inclusion Services, Children's Services and schools worked in partnership to identify high priority vulnerable learners in mid-December. These learners can attend school sites throughout the current Level 4 lockdown period.

Priority vulnerable groups of learners include those:

- with additional learning needs;
- with child protection concerns;
- in need of care and support;
- identified as young carers; and
- that are looked after.

Schools are also asked to target for school-based education any child they feel is vulnerable and is not engaging with remote learning (if there is capacity to safely make provision on school sites).

Learners with statements of SEN are also carefully considered when prioritising children for school based educational provision, given their statutory entitlement to the provision outlined in their statement of SEN.

### 6.4 **Digitally Excluded Learners (DELs)**

From the start of the pandemic, digitally excluded learners who did not have access to an appropriate internet-connected device and/or internet connection have been supported to engage in online learning activities from home. The local authority frequently communicates with schools to identify families facing such difficulties and have sourced ICT equipment and Mifi devices to enable learners to access education.

The audit of digitally excluded learners was refreshed this academic year to identify any new families that had moved into the area or were experiencing challenges in accessing education remotely. The Council is currently in the process of redistributing further devices to the 115 educational settings in the County Borough.

A total of 2,868 devices were provided to DELs in the 2019/2020 academic year and a further 2,635 are to be provided for the newly identified DELs in January 2021.

### 6.5 **Examinations**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, the Education Minister, Kirsty Williams, announced there will be no end of year exams for learners taking GCSEs, AS levels or A-Levels.

Having received proposals from a Design and Delivery Advisory Group set up to support 'wellbeing, fairness and progression' for learners in 2021, the Education Minister advised (on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2020) that her intention is for general qualifications in Wales to be supported by a three pillar approach made up of:

- non-examination assessments;
- internal assessments;
- assessments that are externally set and marked.

Further to the Welsh Government's announcement on the 8<sup>th</sup> January of 2021, that schools are to remain closed to the majority of learners until at least the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, a decision has been made to cancel the spring term assessments (for GCSE, AS and A level learners) that were planned to take place between the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February and the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. Revised assessment arrangements for the award of these qualifications in summer 2021 will be put in place shortly and further information is awaited.

The Minister's policy decision does not relate to vocational qualifications. Adaptations for vocational qualifications have been put in place and awarding bodies are considering whether any further adaptations are required in response to the continued impact of the pandemic. Awarding bodies' considerations will include whether any of the adaptations put in place for GCSEs, AS and A levels may be appropriate for their vocational qualifications.

Ofqual and the UK Government Department for Education have launched a consultation on arrangements for assessing and awarding vocational qualifications in 2021 accessible via: <http://bit.ly/2XKTz8c>. Qualifications Wales advise that most vocational qualifications taken by learners within Wales are within the scope of this consultation and encourage learners within Wales to respond to the consultation.

## 6.6 **Business Continuity Plans**

Business continuity planning is critical to ensuring that schools are able to quickly respond to any challenges and are able to maintain effective delivery of education to all learners throughout various stages of the impact of the pandemic at school, local and national level. Education and Inclusion Services have provided schools with detailed guidance and template documentation to assist with this planning.

All schools must have Business Continuity Plans in place that detail the school-based actions that will be taken to mitigate risks and to ensure that it is possible to ensure continuity in delivering education safely. These have been shared with the local authority and are in the process of being reviewed

## 6.7 **Health and Safety**

Education and Inclusion Services have provided schools with comprehensive guidance documentation ('Guidance for the Safe Re-Opening of Schools' version 7 December 2020) regarding the safe operation of schools during the current pandemic. This document contains information on numerous areas including –

hygiene; cleaning; transport; catering; health and safety; face coverings; dealing with suspected and confirmed cases, etc. The document is regularly updated to reflect changing advice and guidance from Welsh Government in light of the current national position.

All schools have undertaken a COVID-19 specific Health and Safety Risk Assessment in consultation with their governing bodies and staff. The above-mentioned guidance document contained template documentation to assist schools in writing their risk assessments and the risk assessments have been shared with and reviewed by Health and Safety Officers within the Council who also offer assistance and guidance, as requested.

## **6.8 Managing Confirmed Cases**

Schools work very closely with the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) Service and are key in identifying close contacts of confirmed cases, thereby enabling those contacts to isolate for a 10-day period and prevent the spread of the virus. The local authority has provided schools with template letters to issue to parents as part of this process. Schools have also been provided with flow charts and process maps to summarise the actions needing to be taken in various scenarios.

Any learners required to self-isolate as a result of being a close contact of a confirmed case are provided with remote learning to ensure continuation of their education.

Once schools reopen to all learners, lateral flow testing will be rolled out on a phased basis. Eleven of Rhondda Cynon Taf's secondary schools and special schools will be included in the first phase of the roll out. Where lateral flow testing is in place, learners identified as close contacts of a confirmed case would (subject to consent being provided) be able to continue to attend school providing that they undertake a lateral flow test at the start of the school day and the outcome of that test is negative. These processes will be informed by the Mass Testing Pilot that was undertaken in Mountain Ash Comprehensive School in November 2020.

There has been a significant and dramatic reduction in the number of cases of Covid in our schools during lockdown. In the last week of term prior to the Christmas break, there were 157 cases in 54 settings. More recently, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of January, there have been 14 confirmed cases in 10 school settings.

## **6.9 Attendance**

Following consultation, the Welsh Government has revoked the School Performance and Absence Targets (Wales) Regulations 2011 (in force from the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 2020). As a result, schools are not required to set targets for future years or report on those previously set for 2019/20 onwards. However, the annual attendance data collections will continue.

Due to Welsh Government deciding not to reinstate Fixed Penalty Notices/Prosecutions, the Attendance and Wellbeing Service continue to operate

Wellbeing Response Visits for the rest of the spring term. The Attendance and Wellbeing Service liaise with schools on a daily basis and schools advise of pupils who have unauthorised absences from school and request a Wellbeing Response visit from the Attendance and Wellbeing team which aims to discover the reason for the absence and provide any support/assurances as required.

If a learner is unable to attend the physical setting of the school due to self-isolation, the school will continue to engage regularly with the learner remotely.

Attendance rates for the autumn term (from the 14<sup>th</sup> of September following the staggered start) are 89.8% in primary and 85.6% in secondary. Only 3.51% of the school population are currently accessing education on school sites (1362 learners for the week commencing the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2021).

## 6.10 **Partnership Working**

Education and Inclusion Services work closely and meet regularly with Welsh Government, Central South Consortium and many departments within the Council (in particular, Public Health and Protection; Children's Services) as well as many other partners to share up to date information and facilitate opportunities for discussion, questions and problem solving:-

- The Senior Management Team of Education and Inclusion Services meet regularly with headteachers, this can include weekly or fortnightly meetings during periods of significant national change.
- Union meetings were held with senior officers on a fortnightly basis during the autumn term. During the current spring term, these are being held weekly.

The senior management team of Education and Inclusion Services hold termly meetings with Chairs of governing bodies and updates on the operational guidance for schools is circulated regularly to Chairs of Governors. Virtual governing body meetings were established in the autumn and these continue to be held virtually to ensure all governors are fully informed. Governor training is also offered virtually.

## 6.11 **Free School Meal Provision**

Free school meals are provided at school on days that an eligible learner attends the school setting. Where an eligible free school meals learner is unable to attend school due to them needing to shield or self-isolate due to COVID-19, BACS payments of £3.90 per day are made to their parent/carer.

For the periods that schools are open only for vulnerable learners and children of critical workers, BACS payments of £3.90 per day are made for all eligible free school meal learners due to schools being required to provide remote learning.

BACS payments of £3.90 per day also continue to be made to the parents/carers of eligible free school meals learners throughout all holiday periods. Welsh

Government have this provision in place up to and including Easter 2021.

## 7. **SUPPORTING PAPERS AND INFORMATION**

7.1 As general information for the committee, the following table reflects the key guidance documents sent to stakeholders with attached links to the Council website where appropriate:

<b>Document</b>		<b>Date of issue/ circulation</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Childcare Settings Guidance: Issued to assist early years childcare providers with measures to be taken at their settings in relation to the pandemic</b>	
	Protective Measures in Childcare Settings version 5	28/10/20
<b>2.</b>	<b>Distance Learning Guidance for Schools</b>	
	Safeguarding Considerations for Distance Learning v5 – 19.01.21	19/01/21
<b>3.</b>	<b>Frequently Asked Questions – for parents/carers: Covering a number of issues including – school safety measures; cleaning; transport; catering and free school meals; uniform; confirmed cases of COVID-19. These FAQs are published on the Council’s website and updated regularly – <a href="http://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/schoolreturnfaqs">www.rctcbc.gov.uk/schoolreturnfaqs</a></b>	
	FAQs for parents/carers – versions 6, 7 and 8	27/11/20 - 23/12/20
<b>4.</b>	<b>Parents/carers – messaging</b>	
	- Message to parents/carers from Cllr. Andrew Morgan regarding social distancing etc.	16/10/20
	- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services – reminder re: face coverings; distancing; self-isolation; parking around schools etc. – PLUS FLOWCHART (suspected and confirmed cases)	16/10/20
	- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services – WG fire break lockdown from 23 <sup>rd</sup> October	19/10/20
	- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services – new Welsh Government guidance regarding face coverings	25/11/20



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - End of term arrangements</li> <li>- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - End of term arrangements – updated</li> <li>- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - Critical worker children – end of term arrangements</li> <li>- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - Phased January 2021 return</li> <li>- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - Phased January 2021 return - revised</li> <li>- Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - Remote learning until 18<sup>th</sup> January 2021</li> </ul>	<p>07/12/20</p> <p>11/12/20</p> <p>11/12/20</p> <p>17/12/20</p> <p>31/12/20</p> <p>05/01/21</p>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Parents/carers guidance – ‘We are all learning and learners’</b>	
	Blended learning guidance document for parents/carers	Release imminent
<b>6.</b>	<b>Parents/carers – social media – autumn term. The below videos/captions have been published many times via the Council’s social media channels</b>	
	<p><b>Walking to school</b>  <a href="https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1335860618050592769">https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1335860618050592769</a>  <a href="https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1336222999595331584">https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1336222999595331584</a></p> <p><b>Buses</b>  <a href="https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1334143053599297536">https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1334143053599297536</a>  <a href="https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1336679766628446213">https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1336679766628446213</a></p> <p><b>Illnesses</b>  <a href="https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1333372974574006273">https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1333372974574006273</a></p> <p><b>Spring term Breakfast Club</b>  <a href="https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1332217713352200195">https://twitter.com/RCTCouncil/status/1332217713352200195</a></p>	
<b>7.</b>	<b>Reopening Schools - Guidance document issued to headteachers: Regularly updated to reflect changes in the local and national position and to reflect updated guidance from the Welsh Government</b>	
	Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for the safe re-opening of schools VERSION 7 – December 2020	23/12/20

<b>8.</b>	<b>'Firebreak' lockdown guidance</b>	
	Guidance for schools for the 'Firebreak' lockdown period of 23 <sup>rd</sup> October to 9 <sup>th</sup> November 2020	23/10/20
<b>9.</b>	<b>Business Continuity Guidance</b>	
	Business Continuity Planning – Guidance for Schools v.1 – to assist schools with business continuity planning at various stages of escalation of the coronavirus pandemic.	23/12/20
<b>10.</b>	<b>Operational Guidance – Attendance and Wellbeing Service</b>	
	Guidance for Schools - Wellbeing Response Visits – spring term 2021	18/12/20
<b>11.</b>	<b>Management of on-site learning</b>	
	Guidance for Schools for the effective management of the provision of on-site education for high priority vulnerable children and the children of critical workers (January 2021 lockdown period)	Release imminent

## **8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

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

## **9. CONSULTATION**

9.1 There is no requirement to undertake any consultation. The Director of Education and Inclusion Services provided a verbal update at the previous Scrutiny Committee meeting.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

10.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report.

## **11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

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

## **12. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP**

12.1 This is an information report presenting the Cabinet report which outlines how the Council is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **13. CONCLUSION**

- 13.1 Whilst it is proposed that Scrutiny is presented with a regular updates on the Education Directorate's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation relating to schools and Education is often very fluid and fast-moving. In view of this, every effort will be made to verbally update members of these changes, to effectively allow Scrutiny to consider these matters in a timely manner.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

**AS AMENDED BY**

**THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985**

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE**

**27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2021**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION  
AND INCLUSION SERVICES**