



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 20/21

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21ST APRIL 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 during the spring term in response to the ever-changing COVID-19 position.

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 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 gradual easing of 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 Wales entered Alert Level 4 on the 20th of December 2020.

- 4.2 Schools reopened in January 2021 with schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf advised to allocate Monday 4th of January and Tuesday 5th 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 6th of January 2021 onwards.

DEVELOPMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE EASING OF NATIONAL RESTRICTIONS

- 4.3 On the 5th of February, the Education Minister announced that schools would begin a phased return for foundation phase children from the 22nd of February. Learners in nursery, reception, Year 1 and Year 2 were all able to return to their school setting by the end of that week.
- 4.4 On the 3rd of March, the Education Minister announced that from the 15th of March, further year groups would be able to return to school settings. Schools were given a degree of flexibility to develop a plan for the phased return of learners back into schools from the 15th of March, and the following arrangements applied to all schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf:
- **All foundation phase learners (i.e., nursery, reception, Year 1 and Year 2)** continued to attend school throughout the phased introduction of new year groups back in to school.
 - Arrangements for the phased return of learners in **Key Stage 2 (i.e. Years 3, 4, 5 and 6)** commenced on the 15th of March 2021.
 - Arrangements for the phased return of learners in **Years 11 and 13** commenced on the 15th of March 2021.
 - Flexibility was offered to secondary schools, all-through schools and PRUs to provide access to the onsite education provision for learners in **Years 10 and 12** from the 15th of March 2021 onwards.
 - Learners in **Years 7, 8 and 9** were to access at least one check-in on school premises prior to the Easter break.
 - **Vulnerable learners** and the **children of critical workers** continued to access face to face education in school until their year group returned to school.
 - Remote learning continued to be provided for **self-isolating learners** and those **year groups not accessing face to face learning** in school.
- 4.5 The First Minister confirmed (on the 1st of April) that all learners will return to school settings on Monday the 12th of April, immediately following the Easter break.

Preventative measures will continue to be implemented in school settings and updated guidance has already been circulated to schools in readiness for the pending post-Easter return of all learners.

5. EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

The local authority continues to work very closely with all of our schools and provides advice and guidance to school staff as well as regular updates to parents/carers (see section 6 below).

Guidance was provided throughout the Alert Level 4 period reflecting the management of on-site learning during periods of limited attendance. This guidance was updated throughout the various phases of the lockdown easing to reflect the return of more learners to on-site learning provision.

Guidance has also been provided in relation to the introduction of the offer of lateral flow testing for all school staff and more recently, all learners in Year 10 and above.

5.1 Remote learning

On-site learning provision was available to the children of critical workers and to vulnerable learners throughout the whole of the Level 4 lockdown period. Remote learning provision was in place for all other learners from the 14th of December (for secondary schools) and the 16th of December for all other schools. (With learners returning to their school setting as outlined in sections 4.3 and 4.4 above as permitted by Welsh Government dependent upon their year group.)

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 implemented a variety of remote learning options with support from the Council'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.

The local authority produced an information document for parents/carers in January 2021 outlining the differing types of remote learning strategies that may be implemented at various schools – 'Guidance for Parents and Carers on Distance and Blended Learning'.

With the return of all learners to school settings from the 12th of April, remote learning will still be made available to learners who need to self-isolate due to COVID-19.

5.2 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.

A total of 2,868 devices were provided to DELs in the 2019/2020 academic year and a further 2,570 were provided to newly identified DELs in NCY 1 to 13 between January 2021 and March 2021. It is also expected that Welsh Government will make a further 4,456 Chromebooks available to Rhondda Cynon Taf learners in May 2021. The plan will be to prioritise further learners that are eligible for free school meals for this allocation.

5.3 Examinations

On the 10th of November 2020, the Education Minister, Kirsty Williams, announced there will be no end of year examinations for learners taking GCSEs, AS levels or A-Levels.

Having received proposals from a Design and Delivery Advisory Group (DDAG) (comprised of headteachers and college principals) set up to support 'wellbeing, fairness and progression' for learners in 2021, the Education Minister advised (on the 16th of December 2020) that her intention was 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.

However, as a consequence of the Welsh Government's announcement on the 8th January of 2021, that schools were to remain closed to the majority of learners until at least the 29th of January 2021, a decision was made to cancel the spring term assessments (for GCSE, AS and A level learners) that were planned to take place between the 22nd of February and the 23rd of April.

The Design and Delivery Advisory Group have developed revised proposals which have been accepted by the Education Minister. In summary, these are:-

- Learners undertaking GCSE, AS and A levels approved by Qualifications Wales will have their qualifications awarded through a Centre-Determined Grade (CDG) model – this means that grades will be determined by their school or college based on an assessment of the learner's work. This will be

a holistic approach underpinned by evidence of attainment in areas a learner has covered.

Schools and colleges will be able to use a range of evidence to determine the grades to be awarded to their learners, which could include Non-Examination Assessment elements, mock-exams, and classwork. In addition, the WJEC has offered a set of adapted past papers for each qualification which will enable schools to continue to assess learning within their teaching plans, providing extra support for teachers and learners. All evidence used to identify grades must be the learners' own work, but there will be no formal external assessments.

Qualifications Wales has worked with the WJEC, supported by the DDAG, to provide an assessment framework to support schools and colleges in developing their assessment plans, which should demonstrate sufficient coverage of key concepts to allow learners to progress, and detail for how the centre has determined a learner's grade. These assessment plans will be quality assured by the WJEC.

- The deadlines and controls around Non-Examination Assessment have been removed and will not be moderated by the WJEC. However, where possible schools and colleges are encouraged to support learners to undertake some of their Non-Examination Assessment to continue to build learning and skills.

Qualifications Wales have published a timeline for learners which shows that a learner's school or college will discuss the provisional Centre Determined Grades that have been decided for the learner in each of their subjects in June.

Vocational Qualifications

The Minister's policy decision did not relate to vocational qualifications. The awarding of vocational and technical qualifications in 2021 is proposed to differ depending on the type of qualification.

A summary document can be accessed at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/964614/Infographic_-_how_vocational_and_technical_qualifications_will_be_awarded_in_2021.pdf

Qualifications Wales has confirmed that there will be a three-stage appeals process:

Stage 1 – By June schools and colleges will share provisional centre determined grades with their learners. A learner can ask their school or college to review provisional grades and/or check for any errors before they are submitted to WJEC.

Stage 2 – After results day in August, a learner can appeal to WJEC that the grade judgement that their school or college has made is unreasonable and/or a procedural error has been made.

Stage 3 - Following completion of the Stage 2 appeal, learners can request an Exam Procedures Review Service (EPRS) review from Qualifications Wales to check whether WJEC has followed their procedures correctly.

Final qualification grades will not be issued to learners until the results days, which are 10 August for AS and A levels and 12 August for GCSEs.

5.4 **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. This guidance is updated to reflect the changing national position.

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 reviewed by officers. Schools are requested to revisit, update and submit their Business Continuity Plans to the local authority on a regular basis.

5.5 **Health and Safety**

Education and Inclusion Services have provided schools with comprehensive guidance documentation (*'Guidance for the Safe Re-Opening of Schools' version 8 – March 2021*) 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. (During periods of limited attendance on site between January 2021 and March 2021, the local authority issued further guidance documents *'Guidance for schools - Management of on-site learning during periods of limited attendance'* specific to these periods (see section 6 below), with this document being updated regularly to reflect the phased return of more year groups to the school setting as lockdown restrictions were gradually eased.)

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 contains template documentation to assist schools in writing their risk assessments. This template documentation is regularly updated to reflect the national position and Welsh Government guidance. Schools are requested to revisit, update and submit their COVID-19 specific Health and Safety Risk Assessments to the local authority on a regular basis for review by Health and Safety Officers who also offer assistance and guidance, as requested.

5.6 **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 learner required to self-isolate as a result of being a confirmed case themselves, or a close contact of a confirmed case is provided with remote learning to ensure continuation of their education.

5.7 **Lateral Flow Testing**

Welsh Government have provided all schools and childcare/play settings with Lateral Flow Tests. This twice weekly self-administered testing is undertaken at home and can help to regularly and quickly identify positive asymptomatic cases and ask them to self-isolate before coming into schools and childcare/play settings. Test kits are made available to all school staff (including catering, cleaning and supply staff), as well as to peripatetic staff, school transport workers and pupils in Year 10 and above (subject to written consent having been provided).

Staff in all CIW (Care Inspectorate Wales) childcare/play settings have been provided with test kits directly from Welsh Government. Test kits for childminders and unregistered childcare/play settings have been distributed by the RCT childcare team, with 53 of these settings participating in the scheme to date.

Anyone testing positive using a lateral flow test should undertake a PCR test within a 24-hour period of their positive lateral flow test.

Schools and childcare/play settings are aware that testing is to supplement other preventative measures and that maintaining contact groups, wearing face masks, ensuring adequate ventilation, hand washing, cleaning and social distancing etc. must all still be implemented. Along with all of these current preventative measures put in place by schools and settings, testing will help reduce the likelihood of adults unwittingly spreading the virus to others in the setting.

The number of cases of Covid in our schools continues to fall. Between the 20th and 27th of March there have been 6 confirmed cases in 6 school settings.

5.8 **Attendance**

Following consultation, the Welsh Government has revoked the School Performance and Absence Targets (Wales) Regulations 2011 (in force from the 7th 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. The annual attendance data collection for attendance has also been suspended for the 2020/21 academic year for primary and secondary phase.

Due to Welsh Government deciding not to reinstate Fixed Penalty Notices/Prosecutions, the Attendance and Wellbeing Service continue to operate Wellbeing Response Visits into the summer 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 14th of September following the staggered start) were 89.8% in primary and 85.6% in secondary.

For the first half of the spring term, only key worker and vulnerable children provision was made on school sites. Attendance figures increased from 2.48% of the whole school population (964 pupils) at the start of term to a high of 6.84% (2,654 pupils) during the final week before half term.

For the second half of the spring term, attendance increased significantly with the return of the foundation phase and later the whole of primary settings as well as isolated days for some secondary year groups. This increase was from 17.86% of the whole school population (6,929 pupils) on the 22nd of February to 72.04% (27,954 pupils) on the 23rd of March.

Attendance for statutory year groups for the spring term was 94.0% in primary and 89.6% in secondary.

5.9 Partnership Working

Education and Inclusion Services work closely and meet regularly with Welsh Government, Central South Consortium and many departments within the local authority (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 includes fortnightly meetings with secondary school leaders and meetings every 2-3 weeks with primary and special school colleagues depending on national announcements.
- Trade Union meetings are held with senior officers usually on a fortnightly basis.

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. Governing body meetings continue to be held virtually to ensure all governors are fully informed. Governor training is also offered virtually.

5.10 Free School Meal Provision

The Council has seen a significant growth in the number of learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM). The data is summarised as follows:

Month	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20
eFSM	8367	8619	8698	8764	8960	9051	9089	9089
Total	38561	39004	38997	38991	38989	38985	38832	38832
%	21.70%	22.10%	22.30%	22.48%	22.98%	23.22%	23.41%	23.41%

Month	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21
eFSM	9284	9328	9439	9546	9513	9689	9816
Total	36771	38755	38757	38806	38750	39231	39211
%	23.71%	24.07%	24.35%	24.60%	24.55%	24.70%	25.03%

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

BACS payments of £3.90 per day per child 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 2022.

5.11 Breakfast Club Provision

Breakfast club provision continues with a significantly reduced capacity following a health and safety review undertaken prior to the schools returning in September 2020. This review took into account the size of school halls, staffing provision and the need to maintain contact groups. Demand for places has been high but prioritisation cannot be given to any specific groups (e.g., previously unsuccessful applicants, vulnerable groups or key workers) as this provision is intended to provide a healthy breakfast to all learners and is not an emergency childcare provision. The regulatory framework does not allow certain groups to be prioritised above others. Places are allocated on a 'first come - first served' basis in relation to online applications. In the event of regular non-attendance by a pupil (excluding self-isolation and sickness absences), places are re-allocated to pupils on the waiting list.

A further application process was recently undertaken for the summer term (period from the 12th of April to the 20th of July 2021). The Council has continued to allocate all available places based on the previously agreed application processes and capacity calculations, to ensure that social distancing and effective hygiene

and preventative measures can be maintained. All applicants have remained within year groups and this has ensured that risks can be mitigated.

As places are restricted, parents/carers were encouraged to only apply if their child required access to a free, healthy breakfast before the start of the school day. Despite the robust approaches adopted to keep everyone safe, Rhondda Cynon Taf still allocated 3,025 breakfast club places for the spring term.

5.12 Childcare Settings

Between the 20th and the 27th of March, the Council was notified of two confirmed cases in childcare settings. These were both in the same setting and resulted in a full closure.

The majority of childcare and play settings are open. Some out of school, holiday and play settings remain closed. This is mainly due to venue restrictions and concerns about mixing groupings with children from different schools.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a decline in demand for childcare for some age ranges, particularly for after school and holiday care. This can be attributed to parents working from home or losing their jobs, and parental concerns about COVID. However, the childcare sector has adapted well to current restrictions, and has implemented all protective measures to ensure that staff and children remain as safe as possible.

6. SUPPORTING PAPERS AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 As general information for the committee, the following table reflects the key guidance documents sent to stakeholders since January 2021 with attached links to the Council website where appropriate:

Document		Date of issue/ circulation
1.	Schools – correspondence/information	
	Remote learning until the 18 th of January 2021	05/01/21
	Clarification of critical worker categories	06/01/21
	Update regarding lateral flow testing in schools	25/01/21
	First Minister’s announcement on 29/01/21 regarding a possible phased return after February half-term 2021	29/01/21
	Letter regarding arrangements for the return of the Foundation Phase following February half-term	10/02/21
	First Minister’s announcement regarding more year groups possibly returning to school from the 15 th of March 2021	19/02/21

	Free school meals update during phased return of foundation phase learners from the 22 nd of February	02/03/21
	Letters for schools and parents regarding the 15 th of March return for further learners	03/03/21
	Free school meals update during phased return of further learners from the 15 th of March	11/03/21
	Lateral Flow Test information regarding accurately recording results and not testing during holiday periods	17/03/21
	Updated staff risk assessment and returning to work video following pausing of shielding advice from the 31 st of March 2021	23/03/21
2.	Distance Learning Guidance for Schools	
	Safeguarding Considerations for Distance Learning v5 – 19.01.21	19/01/21
3.	Frequently Asked Questions – for parents/carers: Covering a number of issues including – school safety measures; cleaning; transport; catering and free school meals; confirmed cases of COVID-19. These FAQs are published on the Council’s website and updated regularly – www.rctcbc.gov.uk/schoolreturnfaqs	
	FAQs for parents/carers – versions 9, 10, 11 and 12	02/01/21 – 07/04/21
4.	Parents/carers – correspondence	
	Letter to parents/carers from the Director of Education and Inclusion Services - Remote learning until 18 th January 2021	05/01/21
	Letter regarding arrangements for the return of the Foundation Phase following February half-term	10/02/21
	Letter for parents re: 15 th March return for further learners	03/03/21
	Lateral Flow Test information regarding accurately recording results and not testing during holiday periods	17/03/21
5.	Guidance for Parents and Carers on Distance and Blended Learning	
	Guidance document for parents and carers outlining the different forms of learning that can be provided for pupils	25/01/21
6.	Parents/carers – social media – spring term. The below videos/captions have been published many times via the	

	Council's social media channels (Facebook and Twitter)	
	Updated social media graphics (22 nd February 2022) – reflecting return of Foundation Phase	From 22/02/21
	COVID-19 Related Pupil Absence: A Quick Reference Guide for Parents - updated	From 22/02/21
	Updated social media graphics (15 th of March 2022) – reflecting return of further year groups	From 15/03/21
7.	Lateral Flow Testing (LFT) guidance	
	Lateral Flow Testing (LFT) Guidance for Schools in RCT – V1	22/02/21
	Lateral Flow Testing flowchart	23/02/21
	Lateral Flow Testing (LFT) Guidance for Schools in RCT – V2	12/03/21
8.	Business Continuity Guidance (Guidance to assist schools with business continuity planning at various stages of escalation of the coronavirus pandemic)	
	Business Continuity Planning – Guidance for Schools v.2	25/01/21
	Business Continuity Planning – Guidance for Schools v.3	25/03/21
9.	Management of on-site learning during periods of limited attendance (Guidance specific to the Alert Level 4 lockdown period - updated to reflect the changing national position and the phased reopening of schools for different year groups)	
	Guidance for schools - Management of on-site learning during periods of limited attendance – January 2021	28/01/21
	Guidance for schools - Management of on-site learning during periods of limited attendance – v2	11/02/21
	Guidance for schools - Management of on-site learning during periods of limited attendance – v3	04/03/21
10.	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	
	Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for the safe re-opening of schools VERSION 8 – March 2021	29/03/21

7. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

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

8. CONSULTATION

8.1 There is no requirement to undertake any consultation. The Director of Education and Inclusion Services provides regular and detailed Covid updates at Scrutiny Committee meeting.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

9.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

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

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

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

12. CONCLUSION

12.1 Whilst it is proposed that Scrutiny is presented with 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, a termly update will be provided to encapsulate all of the key changes and the wide-ranging documentation sent to schools to ensure that they are kept abreast of national and local changes.

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

21st APRIL 2021

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