

NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	21 October 2021
ITEM TITLE	Well-being and achievement gap, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the impact of covid on the education of all our pupils • what plans schools have for the well-being of all our pupils
CABINET MEMBER	Cllr. Cemlyn Williams

1. RENEW AND REFORM STRATEGY: SUPPORTING LEARNERS' WELLBEING AND PROGRESSION (GwE)

1.1. Purpose of Report

To submit a report for members to scrutinise the following:

- Renew and Reform Strategy: Supporting Learners' Wellbeing and Progression
- Autumn term baseline visits to capture progress and impact;
- The implementation and impact of the accelerated learning programme.

1.2. Background

As we tackle national reform, it becomes clear that we are in a different place to what was imagined when the Curriculum for Wales guidance was published eighteen months ago. We recognise that some of the preparatory work for the curriculum will be devoted to managing the impact of the pandemic over the past year. On the other hand, with an even stronger emphasis on wellbeing and significant investment in learning and teaching, the values underpinning the curriculum have been at the heart of how schools have worked. GwE is fully committed to supporting schools and PRUs to maintain this momentum to ensure that all learners in North Wales receive the highest standard of provision. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that a change, for the better, is possible even in the most challenging circumstances. In North Wales, GwE, the Local Authorities, Schools and PRUs took the opportunity to look at more innovative ways of working.

1.3. Considerations

See attached 'Renew and Reform Strategy: Supporting Learners' Wellbeing and Progression' (Appendix 1), which sets out the strategic direction of our work for the next period. By working with and listening to key partners and stakeholders, we have identified the following themes to support our aim of ensuring that all learners in North Wales receive the highest standard of provision. These themes are set out in our Business Plans and will be implemented through partnership programmes and an offer of generic and unique support to our schools and our PRUs.

- Education Reform / Realisation of the Curriculum
- Resume learning (Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards)
- A strategy to support parents / carers to help their children learn
- Learners' wellbeing and whole school wellbeing
- Workforce wellbeing (GwE and schools)
- Additional Learning Needs
- The Welsh Language
- Leadership Development

- Digital
- Professional Learning

1.4. Also, it outlines how we will evolve the regional model, developments in the school partnership scheme, peer review and school-to-school support, together with the structures and processes in place to identify and support schools of concern.

In North Wales, GwE and the six Local Authorities are committed to working in partnership with schools to develop a robust accountability system in which key stakeholders have confidence and which holds all partners fully accountable for their role in developing our learners. The system's expectations in North Wales are clearly outlined and we aim to achieve them by September 2024.

A summary highlighting the intentions of the Autumn term to hold baseline visits to capture progress and impact is outlined in Appendix 2. The visit recording template is included in Appendix 3.

A summary highlighting the action and impact of the accelerated learning programme can be found in Appendix 4.

1.5. Consultation that has taken place

A meeting was held to share the strategy with all of the headteachers within the region. The regional Headteacher Strategic Forums, representatives from Local Authorities, the Full Team, the Management Board and GwE Joint Committee were further consulted.

1.6. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Renew and Reform Strategy: Supporting Learners' Wellbeing and Progression

Appendix 2 - A summary highlighting the intentions of the Autumn term to hold baseline visits to capture progress and impact

Appendix 3 - Visit recording template

Appendix 4 - A summary highlighting the action and impact of the accelerated learning programme

2. DIGITAL EDUCATION STRATEGY

2.1. What we hope to achieve through the digital education strategy is highly ambitious and a sign of how we are prioritising our children's education here in Gwynedd. Simply put, this strategy, when fully implemented, is about putting a suitable device to enable digital learning in the hands of every child from year 3 to year 11. Gwynedd will be one of the first authorities to do so in Wales and that is something we take pride in.

2.2. During the period where a significant number of learners were at home, we re-purposed over 2500 Chromebook devices for home use. We also shared 175 MiFi devices that ensured access to the internet. No devices were bought exclusively to meet the needs of home learning, as this could have divert us from our strategy. Learners from the primary and secondary sectors benefitted from the equipment and stock of devices that were already in our schools.

2.3. Significant work has already been accomplished on our strategy, including upgrading the school network in accordance with the digital education standards, as well as transforming the web filtering method. Just over £1.3m has been invested in the network over the last two years. Additionally, a

significant number of devices have been shared in accordance with the strategy. Enough iPads have been shared to ensure one is given to every four Foundation Phase learners, with enough Chromebooks shared that every learner from year 3 to 6 has a device each. Windows 10 devices have also been prepared for every pupil in years 7, 10 and 11. Every teacher in Gwynedd will receive a device of quality through this strategy over the coming months in the hope that this will spark imagination and further stimulate the innovation and effectiveness of the digital learning aspects across the sectors.

2.4. Estyn's thematic report on the Authority's work in digital learning says:

Cameo: Digital learning as a legacy of the pandemic

The authority has accelerated its strategic plan to provide a laptop for all pupils in years 5-11, with the first allocation being distributed in spring for key stage 4 learners. Additionally, this strategy also includes the provision of working laptops for all teachers to facilitate digital learning. As a result, the schools are able to plan for a future where learners have greater access to ICT, therefore ensuring that new digital skills acquired during the lockdown periods are embedded into teaching and learning in the future.

2.5. The devices we re-purposed and lent have now been returned to the schools. The device to child ratio in the primary sector is close to the strategy's ambition, and if there was a need to move to blended learning the resource would be available to them. Although we have started the work on preparing the secondary devices they have not yet been shared with the pupils.

The lessons following the pandemic have been learned and good practice continues.

3. ALN&I SERVICE

3.1. *Lockdown periods since March 2020 have created significant challenges for children and young people, and for the whole education workforce. Our consideration of children and young people with needs has been a priority during this period.*

The ALN&I Service has reviewed the delivery model in a very short time to respond to this over the past year and a half. Hand in hand with this period, the statutory duty to provide in accordance with the SEN Act (2002) has continued, and the transition work for the new Legislation has also continued. There has also been consistent collaboration between the ALN Service, Children's Services and Health Agencies to gain coherence with this work. The website received a high number of hits during lockdown - As many as 130,700 hits in April 2020 compared to about 10,000 before the period.

The model below summarises the provision that has been maintained through the lockdown periods during 2020/2021:

Autumn and Spring Term Provision 2020/21:



A range of training has been delivered by the Educational Psychology Service before (already in place before the pandemic), during, and after, to develop interventions that support learners with well-being and positive mental health development (e.g. ELSA, Seasons for Growth, Mindfulness). This is part of the development of whole-school strategies for Well-being and Positive Mental Health. This has involved working closely with the Healthy Schools Scheme and the CAMHS service to ensure strategic co-ordination. Use of grants to extend the availability of School Counselling has been made. This work responds to Estyn's recommendation within the June 2021 Thematic Report of establishing strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on pupils' physical and mental health.

Referrals from schools for input to target Communication and Interaction skills has increased, and we are targeting grants towards this area. We have also developed a new method of access criteria which also provides guidance to Schools on skills development in this area. Working closely with the Speech and Language Therapy Service within Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board has been essential.

The statutory provision dispute resolution work with parents during lockdown has ensured that no SEN Tribunal appeal has proceeded during the period despite risks around this.

4. CASE STUDIES

To try and bring to life the experience of how schools have and continue to respond to the pandemic while continuing to provide education and ensuring the wellbeing of learners, here are three case studies from three schools in Gwynedd, namely:

- Ysgol Cefn Coch and Talsarnau
- Ysgol Botwnnog
- Ysgol Pendalar

We will elaborate further on the experiences and efforts of these schools in the committee itself.

4.1 Ysgol Cefn Coch and Talsarnau

Ysgol Cefn Coch and Talsarnau have been working together for over four years. Talsarnau is a small school with less than 50 children approximately three miles from Ysgol Cefn Coch in Penrhyndeudraeth with 170 pupils on roll. Both schools share one Strategic Head and both have an Assistant Headteacher who are members of the Senior Management Team. Leaders meet regularly to steer the strategic direction of the schools and the staff of both schools meet on a weekly basis to discuss curricular plans among other managerial aspects. By the start of the lockdown period the foundations for the collaboration had been established firmly and to the advantage of the stakeholders of both schools alike. The Senior Team was stronger with two Assistant Heads to take on the responsibilities of the Strategic Head when making difficult decisions. In the same way the staff of both schools were able to support each other in teaching as well as wellbeing aspects.

This was an unprecedented time when staff had to familiarise themselves with new methods and techniques of teaching on digital platforms, literally overnight. Fortunately, we had specialists in the field of Information Technology who were able to guide staff in both schools to meet the demand. This meant that no one felt isolated. They also shared the preparation work of digital resources which reduced workload. We also made use of the digital resources available between the two schools to distribute to the children who needed them. This was a professional development for all staff. The situation could have been very different and far more challenging for the smaller school if it had less support.

Another benefit of collaborating was re-establishing and providing a care club for key workers children and vulnerable children. One centre was available for both schools. Again, this reduced the workload and increased the capacity of staff available for supervision. Another element of collaboration that was strengthened during the lockdown was cluster collaboration led by GwE Improvement Support Advisor. Weekly meetings have been arranged to ensure that we as leaders are all confident in our decisions. Similarly, regular meetings were arranged by the Education Authority to discuss challenges and solutions. Risk Assessment templates were provided which were regularly modified and updated as the situation changed and this was a major blunder. The sense of unity across the Authority and the support and guidance was strong. It is pleasing to note that the support from the Authority and GwE remains so today and that certainly puts us in a strong position to face the challenges of the current period.

Rhys Glyn, Headteacher at Ysgol Cefn Coch

4.2 Ysgol Botwnnog

There is no doubt that the impact of the pandemic is far-reaching on society as a whole, and certainly on young people and schools. Closing the schools at short notice during the first lockdown has been an unprecedented challenge for schools by turning to 'new' approaches, but it was responded to quickly and effectively. Not only education has been affected but also the wider well-being of pupils as they lost the daily face-to-face contact with their peers and school staff. Schools had to ensure continuity of education for pupils as well as offering further support to those who needed it. Returning to school and into 'normal' learning we continue to face many challenges and work more than ever with other agencies to support our pupils to pursue as 'normal' an education as possible. The next period is extremely important for all parts of our society. We want to get as many pupils as possible into school to get the best out of them academically and emotionally. To this end, it is vital that support for schools and other services that work with us to respond to the needs of our young people will continue to be developed for years to come.

Dylan Minnice, Pennaeth Ysgol Botwnnog

4.3 Ysgol Pendalar

Background

Ysgol Pendalar, Caernarfon is a special day school, for pupils aged 3 to 19 years old. They have a wide spectrum of additional learning needs including severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties, physical and medical difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders.

Pandemic Barriers

In March 2020, Estyn had arranged to inspect the school but due to the pandemic and the lockdown the visit was delayed at the last minute. When Estyn visited the school in May 2013, there were 87 pupils on the roll, but today there are 117 pupils and the school is filled to capacity.

Being able to look after the well-being of children and young people is very difficult when pupils have to wait their turn for personal care because there are not enough toilet areas or hoists available. The lack of facilities also affects staff morale with many spending lunch time in their cars.

Less support is available for pupils and their families outside school because 'health & social care' services follow different operating guidelines to the special school.

There has been an increase in the intensity levels of pupils' needs, which may have been compounded by the impact of the pandemic.

The impact of stress on staff and the functioning of the school

Maintaining appropriate staffing levels is a daily challenge and is exacerbated within special schools following updating the guidance which came into effect on 11th October 2021.

The shortfall in staffing levels makes it very difficult to release staff for the purpose of planning and implementing changes to the ALN and Curriculum for Wales transition.

The processing time of DBS checks is also a problem as it creates a delay before new staff start and this contributes to additional pressure on the staffing structure.

Successes

Assistance from senior officers within the Education Department to make sense of ongoing updates regarding the guidelines.

The education officer in regular contact with the school, and assisting the headteacher with difficult decisions that need to be justified.

GwE has continued to support the school by providing resources e.g. SDP and assistance with curriculum provision. GwE also recognises that planning to implement these changes is very difficult for schools at the moment.

Wellbeing activity has been a priority since the start of the pandemic, with the school receiving the 'Special Schools Wellbeing Award' national accreditation in July.

Using an app to communicate with parents has been key to progress the conversation about continuing to learn.

Several schemes with external partners have increased wellbeing and learning opportunities to do with nature, and Ysgol Pendalar contributes to the Welsh Government's environmental targets.

Bethan Morris-Jones, Pennaeth Ysgol Pendalar

5. THE GAP IN WELLBEING AND ATTAINMENT

The Wellbeing and Achievement Gap has been identified as one of the key priorities in the Council Plan for 2021-22, with a focus on two areas in particular:

- Early Years
- Post-16 Education

5.1. Early Years

The pandemic has certainly highlighted the vulnerability of the early years sector, with inconsistency across the county in the range and availability of services. The range of partners involved in the provision and the strategic direction of the field nationally makes it difficult to structure our services here in Gwynedd. As a result, we intend to present a strategy for the field that will have the needs of Gwynedd at its centre, consulting on its content with all key stakeholders over the upcoming months.

The 'Early Years' field bridges Education, Health and Care, Childcare and Play and Health provisions. As a result, there are many partners in the field and there is more than one agency offering different procedures and schemes here in Gwynedd.

The Council has some statutory duties in the field e.g. Education Act (Statutory Foundation Phase Provision Guidance), Childcare Act, Children and Families Measure; and other elements sitting with the Health Board (Healthy Child Wales Programme) and other partners (Building a Brighter Future, Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan etc). A large number of services and provisions in the field are supported and co-ordinated by national bodies commissioned by the Welsh Government and this, at times, means that not everyone is heading in the same direction and putting Gwynedd's families and needs first and foremost.

The impact of the pandemic adds to the complexities facing families who want easy access to services, and simple answers to their questions and queries, and this presents complexity and challenges at a strategic level.

We are going to look at carrying out an assessment of the adequacy of our provision across Gwynedd and highlight areas currently without access. We will also look in detail at sustainable funding models, convenient locations and alternative options to provide services to rural areas.

5.2. Post-16 Education

During the pandemic concerns have arisen that the 16-24 age group were disproportionately affected by the crisis more than any other age group. To understand the situation better we are in the process of collating all the evidence to try and get a true picture of the situation. The intention then is that a cross-departmental group that sits within the Council, who have been part of discussions regarding this topic in the past, will take care of the work program that may emerge from the findings of the research.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Members are asked to:

- make any comments on what has been achieved in response to the gap in wellbeing and attainment