

<b>Name of Scrutiny Committee</b>	Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
<b>Date of Meeting</b>	8 February 2022
<b>Title of Item</b>	Harassment of headteachers, teachers and school staff on social media
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams

## **1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

The purpose of this report is to respond to a request from members of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee for a presentation on harassment of teachers and school staff on social media as well as to share information with members about what has been done and achieved by the Education Department to help schools deal with situations where this is happening.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

- i) Occasionally, but increasingly so recently, there are examples of the use of social media to harass headteachers, teachers and school staff.
- ii) This may be by parents or carers, pupils or other members of the public.
- iii) Most incidents fall into one of two categories:
  - a. General comments on social media;
  - b. Posting images or videos of school staff on digital apps (e.g. *tiktok*) without permission, and with those often ridiculing and inappropriate.

## **3 TAKING ACTION ON CASES**

- i) In relation to the first category (a.), a decision needs to be reached as to whether the comments express opinions only, or whether they contain comments that are either libellous or threatening, or both. If schools bring any enquiry to the attention of the Education Department, we will advise as follows.
- ii) If the comments are a matter of expressing an opinion only, and even if a school does not accept that the comments are fair or correct, very little, if anything, can be done about this. In a free society, people have a right to express their views about services, including public services. Possible examples of these situations can be elaborated upon during the meeting on 8 February.
- iii) Should a case arise where the comments are either libellous or threatening, or both, legal advice should be sought or the matter should be brought to the

attention of the police, who may investigate the matter on behalf of the complainant.

- iv) In cases that fall into the second category (b.), it is advised that this is not acceptable, and that they are matters which are the subject of disciplinary against the relevant individuals.
- v) This type of harassment became apparent in some of Gwynedd's secondary schools (and schools across Wales, the UK and beyond), during the autumn term 2021, mainly through the use of the digital app *tiktok*. The examples reported included images and videos of school staff taken without permission, and used inappropriately, and pupils being filmed, or filming themselves, taking part in monthly 'challenges' that included some that were sexual or violent in nature, and were promoted internationally by inappropriate use of the digital app *tiktok*.
- vi) The Education Department acted immediately by asking secondary school headteachers about the extent of the problem, and a letter (see Appendix 1) was provided by the Education Department, and was sent to the secondary schools headteachers to be forwarded to all parents/carers of secondary pupils. The guidance and support were appreciated by the schools, along with the timeliness of the department's response to this situation.

#### **4 CURRENT SITUATION**

- i) In relation to the first category (a.), the department continues to advise schools (see 3 i) if cases arise where schools bring this to our attention.
- ii) In relation to the second category (b.), our schools continue to monitor the situation although the need to re-send the letter is not believed to have arisen since the autumn term 2021.
- iii) A specific item has been programmed for the next meeting of the secondary headteachers Strategic Group on 2 February to discuss the situation further with the hope that the preventative action taken by the department in autumn 2021 has ensured control of the situation, and this can be reported to the committee on 8 February.

#### **5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Members are requested to accept the report, and offer observations on its content.