

Cyngor Sir CEREDIGION County Council

REPORT TO: Learning Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 20 September 2021

LOCATION: Via videoconferencing

TITLE: Estyn Letter – Summer Term 2021

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT: For Information

REASON THE COMMITTEE HAS REQUESTED THE INFORMATION:

BACKGROUND:

In November 2020, Estyn held a virtual meeting with the Schools and Culture Department's officers, to evaluate our work in supporting schools during the Covid pandemic. Estyn subsequently outlined its findings in a letter, which was presented to this committee, to Cabinet and to the Audit Committee. Estyn also compiled a composite national report, which contained specific recommendations.

In May 2021, Estyn held a second meeting with every Local Authority and focused on our work in response to the national report's recommendations. Estyn sent a letter to the Chief Executive on 16 July 2021, outlining our work in those areas.

WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS:

Has an Integrated Impact Assessment been completed? If not, please state why

Summary:
Long term:
Collaboration:
Involvement:
Prevention:
Integration:

RECOMMENDATION:

To note the contents of the letter received from Estyn

REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATION:

Contact Name:

Meinir Ebbsworth

Designation:

Chief Education Officer

Date of Report:

22.7.21

Acronyms:

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16.07.21

Dear Eifion Evans,

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with an overview of the progress you have made in relation to recommendations from the overarching thematic report we published in January. The narrative reflects the information and views you shared with our link inspectors during their engagements with you throughout the term,

The thematic identified five recommendations for the Welsh Government and recognised that a whole system approach was needed to address these. The first three recommendations were more immediate and urgent in nature, whilst the last two recommendations will take longer to address. From our discussions with you, feedback from learners and our engagement work with schools, it is clear that, through collaboration, progress was made across Wales in equipping schools and learners to provide better remote learning experiences during the second lockdown.

In line with our new approach for thematic reports, we will be writing to the Welsh Government in early 2022 to seek feedback on the work they have done to address the recommendations we made to them.

We hope you will find this summary a helpful affirmation of the work that you have done to support your learners and learning communities during the last six months.

R1 Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity

The authority has continued to provide pupils with technology equipment during the second lockdown. It has refined its provision by adapting the equipment's settings so that it works smoothly away from school sites. This means that the process of releasing equipment from schools to homes is quicker and more expedient than during the first lockdown. The authority used the Ed Tech grant to purchase around 2,800 new devices and 65 Mi-Fi devices, which were distributed to pupils that needed them. A device was provided successfully to all families that requested them through the school. The authority has prepared acceptable use agreements and shared these with schools to be distributed with the equipment. In addition to providing equipment to families that needed devices, the authority provided a comprehensive training programme to raise the skill levels of staff and pupils.

There are a very few areas in Ceredigion where there is no mobile telephone signal, which means that Mi-Fi equipment does not work either. Pupils who live in these areas were offered the opportunity to attend their school to work face-to-face with adults, or to receive paper packs to work on at home.

The authority has recently conducted an audit of what equipment schools would need should there be another lockdown. This audit has identified the need to provide visualisers for teachers to be able to model work when delivering remote teaching. On the basis of the audit, the authority also intends to provide equipment to all pupils, rather than one piece of equipment per home, in addition to headphones to enable them to concentrate on lessons.

Looking to the future, Ceredigion has plans in place to offer devices to families on a three-year repayment agreement.

R2 Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs

The authority has a good overview of the situation in schools, including the nature and success of learning experiences provided by schools and pupil engagement. It has a sound grasp of the training needs of school staff. It conducts engagement calls with headteachers around every three weeks and asks about the nature of the sessions in all classes, the timetables and differentiation.

Engagement calls were conducted with a pastoral ethos as advisers focused on the quality of remote learning experiences and pupil engagement. Schools were signposted to the authority's comprehensive information and communication technology (ICT) programme on its Ceredigion Accelerated Learning Programme website, to promote staff and pupils' skills. For example, there were training packages of a high standard available online for a wide range of suitable software to support remote teaching and learning. The authority noted their questionnaires show that schools appreciate the online training package and useful webinars on how to teach blended lessons and assess pupils.

The authority has a sound awareness of staff training needs through regular engagement. It has offered weekly upskilling sessions to its staff, tailored to their needs, throughout the lockdown period. The authority is aware of who attended each training session, and advisors signposted schools to some specific training sessions, where appropriate. Officers monitored the level of engagement over time at individual school level. Although there is a feeling that some learners had begun to lose interest by the end of the first lockdown, engagement during the second lockdown was significantly better. Several schools are able to demonstrate 100% engagement during the lockdown, and all schools engaged with homes when pupils did not complete work or attend sessions. The additional learning need (ALN) units and the pupil referral unit were open to all pupils throughout the second lockdown, and attendance levels were consistently good.

Education officers add packages of subject and cross-curricular resources to their 'Carlam' website regularly. The packages support schools as they focus on skills, but in interesting and exciting contexts.

Recently, since leaving ERW, the authority has created a Ceredigion resources page online, which acts as a hub for its professional learning offer. It is very aware of staff wellbeing and is careful not to inundate the workforce with too many broad choices in 2021-22. Therefore, the offer is focused on four sections, namely skills, wellbeing, curriculum development and supporting ALN reform. The website includes relevant training resources for the four sections, with a range of resources to support and model. All training videos that have already been used are kept in a repository so that they can be used for new training in the future or as a quick reminder for staff.

R3 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

The authority ensures that school support advisers are aware of the funding received by all schools and know how it has been used. They also ask headteachers for an explanation and justification of expenditure as a result of the additional funding.

During school leader forums, headteachers have been given opportunities to share ideas and plan their use of the grants jointly. At the beginning of the second lockdown, secondary schools saw value in employing teachers for specific hours in several areas to tackle the needs within their schools. For example, one secondary school employed three teachers on various part-time contracts to target health and wellbeing through physical education, additional academic support for transitioning pupils and numeracy interventions for pupils in key stages 3 and 4.

School leaders have expressed their appreciation for the authority's arrangements to increase the capacity of schools to support the wellbeing of vulnerable pupils and develop their social skills. Since September, the authority has allocated behaviour assistants, youth workers, youth justice workers and leisure centre staff to work in secondary and all-age schools.

Overall, schools saw the need to strengthen oracy, and Welsh oracy skills in particular. In response to this, education officers prepared resources to support the promotion of Welsh oracy. These include virtual 'Language Class' oracy resources, created and shared to rebuild pupils' oracy skills and increase their confidence in using the language. Resources are varied and useful. Their engagement with schools shows that some qualitative evidence in recent weeks has identified that pupils are beginning to 'regain' their Welsh. There were no instances of pupils changing their medium of education during lockdown.

Schools were encouraged to prioritise the social skills of the youngest pupils. Several schools succeeded in halving their class sizes due to the additional funding that was received through grants. In their smaller groups, their oral skills were targeted, and schools worked closely with the Healthy Schools team to target free play with the youngest pupils. Programmes are in place to develop the effectiveness of the Incredible Years programme, the use of outdoor areas and listening skills further.

Ceredigion had already established the innovative e-sgol provision before the pandemic. This provision offered remote lessons, and one of the original objectives was to broaden the choice for A-Level pupils in Ceredigion. During the pandemic, this resource has been used to enrich the education of pupils in Ceredigion and across Wales. Ceredigion secured tutors for pupils in years 11 to 13 across 10 subjects, which were offered bilingually where possible. As part of the offer, 300 A-Level pupils attended revision sessions across 4 subjects in both languages in Ceredigion, and 3,000 attended nationally. Plans are in progress to organise similar events from January 2022 onwards for a wider range of subjects and at GCSE level.

R4 Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils

Officers have used wellbeing questionnaires and data from the Children's Commissioner's questionnaire to evaluate the physical health and mental health of pupils across the county. They add to this information with information gathered during engagement calls. Officers are able to support schools to escalate to other services where necessary, for example through the Early Support Portal.

Scrutinising child protection referral data allows officers to identify patterns and prepare support resources. Referrals to specialist services have increased since the first lockdown, particularly in mental health and wellbeing, and domestic violence. Although the authority has provided online counselling sessions, it was realised that it was not ideal for pupils to receive their sessions at home. Since face-to-face sessions have resumed, the number that receive counselling has more than doubled, with around a third of this number already on the waiting list. The authority is working proactively to resolve the situation by providing early interventions before counselling is needed, for example, through using schools' 'hafan' (nurture room) provision purposefully to support the wellbeing of identified groups of pupils. The use of ELSAs (Emotional Literacy Support Assistants) is also a successful feature of wellbeing provision. The education psychology service has produced a training programme on supporting wellbeing in the classroom, which is a 6-hour programme based on psychology that is part of the ELSA programme. By the end of the summer term, 88% of schools in Ceredigion will have at least one ELSA in post. In the meantime, they are providing support to schools by sharing good practice through video conferencing. A summary of the 'Coronavirus and me 2¹' questionnaire was produced, which shared the main points with schools. Resources have been produced to respond to the concerns that were identified in the questionnaires and have been shared with all schools.

Officers keep a detailed and up-to-date database of any instances of low attendance. The inclusion team works closely with families to encourage pupils to return to school. It has succeeded in significantly reducing the number of pupils who had not returned to school.

The authority focuses on promoting pupils' physical health in three ways: by training schools in physical literacy, working with partners to prioritise their work on play in primary schools and mental health in secondary schools, and by promoting the use of outdoor areas. It also promotes pupils' physical and mental health by preparing cross-curricular packs for schools. These packs include videos of ideas for physical activities, messages from celebrities to inspire pupils to take part in physical activity, and many ideas for schools to get pupils fit and active. It also focuses on the whole-school framework for Mental Health and Wellbeing. It has provided a summary of the framework on mental and emotional wellbeing and has presented it to internal staff and professional partners that work with schools.

The authority also offers an online wellbeing programme, which provides guidance to all members of staff in all schools on how to take care of their own wellbeing.

¹ Coronavirus and Me: A second nationwide survey of the views and experiences of children and young people in Wales, January 2021. Children's Commissioner for Wales.

A5 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 education service's evaluation and planning procedures are thorough and rigorous. They are structured in three tiers, which each sub-tier completing a self-evaluation process that feeds the next tier. Headteacher questionnaires are an important part of the process, which are given detailed attention as evidence and are a focal point for the planning process. For example, feedback from headteachers shows that some schools need more support with pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL). By scrutinising information from the self-evaluation, the authority was able to organise an EAL network between these schools.

The service evaluates the effect of policies and practices that were developed recently when monitoring progress each quarter. The service's resources are allocated and provided to support departments' priorities.

As a result of the success of providing online training since the first lockdown, a training programme is provided virtually with a comprehensive menu for staff training days in place for the summer and autumn terms. There is a strong focus on preparing schools for the new curriculum. The secondment of the Curriculum for Wales Co-ordinator has been extended for an additional year to ensure continuity and progression in the work that schools had already begun. The aim is to increase momentum by creating Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) networks and fund an 'idea powerhouse' for each AoLE. This is supported further by providing a 'Coaching and Mentoring' learning programme for primary and secondary senior leaders as a model of promoting, encouraging and continuing to develop teaching and learning in all schools.

Thank you for your work and for your ongoing professional dialogue with our inspectors.

Regards,



Jassa Scott
Strategic Director