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| <b>Committee</b>               | Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee  |
| <b>Title of Report</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education Annual Report 2018-19, 2019-20</li> <li>• The Education Department's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic</li> <li>• The Education Department's Priorities</li> </ul> |
| <b>Date of meeting</b>         | 4 February 2020   |
| <b>Author</b>                  | Garem Jackson, Head of Education  |
| <b>Relevant Cabinet Member</b> | Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams   |

## **1. BACKGROUND**

1.1 The outcomes for the summer of 2019, together with the Education Department's Annual Report for the academic year September 2018-August 2019, were due to be submitted before the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on 19 March 2020.

1.2 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee was not held as intended, and as a result, almost a year later, the following is submitted before the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee, combining two years' performance (i.e. the 2018-19 and 2019-20 academic years):

- The Annual Report of the Education Department 2018-19 and 2019-20
- A Summary of the Education Department's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic
- The Education Department's Priorities 2020-21

## **2. THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

2.1 In accordance with the request of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee, the Education Department is filling the gap created by COVID-19 and has drawn up an Annual Report (two years) to enable scrutinisers to have a complete overview of the Department's work. The Annual Report is to be found in Appendix 1.

2.2 The Education Department acknowledges that ensuring effective scrutiny of a document that encompasses two years at a committee meeting is not an easy task, and as a result, has attempted to formulate a summary report, which draws attention to the Department's usual work, positive aspects, along with fields that need addressing over the next period.

## **3. THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

3.1 In addition to the Annual Report, the Education Department has included an appendix with a copy of slides previously shared with all Gwynedd elected members in a closed forum in order to share information on how the Department has supported schools and responded to the COVID-19 situation since March 2020.

3.2 The response of the Education Department and schools to the first lockdown period can be summarised into the following areas:

- Childcare

- Well-being
- Distance Learning
- Information Technology
- The Welsh Language

and through the supplementary slides, members will be guided through the response of the Education Department and schools to the lockdown period and COVID-19.

3.3 In addition, we wish to elaborate further below on some provisions in response to the lockdown period and COVID-19.

#### 3.4 ALN&I Service

The ALN&I service supported schools and maintained the service throughout the lockdown period and beyond, including:

- Providing resources and advice on a range of topics related to coping with the emergency on the service's website ([www.adyach.cymru](http://www.adyach.cymru)). Monthly individual hits on the website increased from 15,000 in January to 130,000 in April.
  - Allocating a link member of staff to each school with responsibility for weekly communication with them, and offering support and advice on individual cases. School leaders have appreciated this service.
  - Conducting emergency quality assurance meetings to identify and respond to significant concerns raised by schools.
  - Education welfare officers provided regular contact and support for vulnerable families and facilitated communication with their children's schools.
  - The Educational Psychology Service maintained regular contact with schools, and provided support and guidance relating to well-being and emotional health issues.
  - Increased capacity to provide in-school counselling for pupils from year 6 upwards, and counsellors continued to work with pupils via video conferencing throughout the lockdown period and the closure of schools.
  - The 'Online Individual Development Plan (IDP)' system enabled continued monitoring of learners' progress, and the conducting of virtual statutory reviews.
  - Access to provision processes continued in order to ensure continuous support. Regular communication made it possible to arrange bespoke training for teaching assistants who work with individual pupils, training on provision for learners with sensory impairment, the sharing of resources, teaching materials, and the provision of advice to parents through video meetings.
  - The Authority did not receive a Tribunal challenge during the period, and three dispute resolution cases were resolved during the school closure period and, as a result, these cases did not go to tribunal.
  - "Worthwhile training and support was provided for school staff" which enabled schools, for example, to continue running ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) sessions.
- ALN Quality Officers have provided useful support to relevant school staff as they prepare for the Additional Learning Needs Bill (2020), such as amending their provision map.

3.5 The positive features of the service in response to COVID-19 outlined above are also included in the Estyn Thematic Survey report on the work of the Local Authority to support schools and PRUs during the pandemic.

#### 3.6 Information Technology

The Education Department was also very proactive and progressive in the field of ICT during the lockdown period, ensuring 1,200 Chromebook devices and 175 MiFi devices for families who were without access to technology.

3.7 In addition to this, the Education Department drew up leading policies and procedures to allow Gwynedd schools to be distance learning through live learning technology. Gwynedd's progressive policy was eventually adopted by a number of other authorities, and the Authority has been innovative in promoting and encouraging live learning sessions with our schools.

3.8 Here is a cameo from the Estyn Thematic Report on the Local Authority's work to support schools and PRUs during the pandemic:

***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 to be distributed in the spring for those in key stage 4. This strategy also includes the provision of a new work laptop for all teachers to facilitate digital learning. As a result, schools are able to plan for a future where learners have greater access to ICT, thus ensuring that new digital skills learned during lockdown periods are embedded in future teaching and learning.*

### 3.9 Communication

In addition, the Education Department attached great importance to communicating with stakeholders during the pandemic, seeking to ensure timely guidance, guidelines and decisions to enable schools to operate in the most appropriate way under the circumstances. The significance of this timely communication is conveyed in Estyn's Thematic Report:

*The Head of Education has maintained direct and regular communication with officers, school leaders and elected members throughout the pandemic.*

*There has been strong collaboration within the primary strategic forum and the secondary headteachers' strategic forum during the lockdown period. All decisions, plans and policies have been agreed through these forums and through this consistent method of communication. School leaders appreciated this and felt that it reflected the local authority and schools' shared responsibility.*

### 3.10 The Welsh Language

During the lockdown period, Language Centre staff have had to adapt and transform the way they provide support for latecomers to acquire the Welsh language. Language Centre staff were in fact the first to pilot live learning sessions during the Summer Term 2020, in order to maintain the spoken language of latecomers who attended Language Centres during the 2019-20 academic year. Language Centre and school staff recognised that most of the latecomer learners only had access to the Welsh language and the opportunity to practise speaking and listening skills through these live learning sessions. To complement the live learning sessions, Language Centre staff also set up Google Classroom for the learners on Hwb to provide latecomers with further opportunities to practise and acquire the Welsh language. Here is a cameo from the Estyn Thematic Report on the Local Authority's work in supporting latecomers:

***Cameo: Supporting learners who are new to the Welsh language***

*One example of the close alignment of the work of the local authority and GwE is their approach to supporting schools to develop pupils' Welsh language skills. Some coastal areas of Gwynedd experienced a significant influx of non-Welsh speakers during the*

*lockdown period. The challenge of catering for their linguistic needs when schools reopened in September was compounded by the difficulties in running Welsh language units in their traditional form. To withstand this, in order to support primary schools, the local authority arranged for the specialist teachers to provide an outreach service on a cluster basis, while the cluster's supporting improvement officer worked with the schools to create and adapt Welsh language schemes of work.*

#### **4. THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S PRIORITIES**

##### **Well-being and Attainment Gap**

- 4.1 As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Education Department and Council have identified the well-being and attainment gap as one of the top priorities for the 2020-21 academic year due to schools reopening for learners for the new academic year in September 2020.
- 4.2 We are aware that the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown period have highlighted the vulnerability of the early years sector. As a result, over the next period it is intended to focus on understanding the impact of the lockdown period on the well-being of young children, reviewing our arrangements and provisions as a Council to ensure the best start for families with children aged 0-5.
- 4.3 Following the first lockdown period, there was concern that some children and young people may be left behind in terms of their educational attainment, and that some would need additional support to close that gap, as well as the need for support with their well-being.
- 4.4 In response to this concern, since September 2020, all schools in Gwynedd have implemented an 'Accelerated Learning Programme' with funding from the Welsh Government to respond to the impact of the lockdown period on the well-being and attainment of certain groups of learners aged 5-16. The Education Department in conjunction with GwE is supporting the schools to implement this programme.
- 4.5 Beyond school, we also realise that the 16-24 age group has been disproportionately affected by the crisis, more than any other age group. It is therefore intended to give specific attention to this field in order to mitigate any knock-on effects, ensuring that young people receive appropriate support and provision to enable them to thrive.
- 4.6 In addition, the ALN&I service has created a library of resources to promote well-being and mental health which is available on the service's website, and the service has added capacity to the counselling service to ensure support for learners following the lockdown period.

##### **Blended Learning**

- 4.7 Early in the lockdown period, the Education Department was at the forefront of drawing up leading policies and procedures to allow Gwynedd schools to be distance learning through live learning technology. Gwynedd's progressive policy was eventually adopted by a number of other authorities.
- 4.8 Early in the lockdown period, the Education Department proactively encouraged the value of live learning sessions in promoting well-being, and enriching the learning experience for learners. Language Centre staff were among the first to pilot live learning sessions to ensure that latecomers could continue to develop their oral skills in Welsh.

- 4.9 The survey by the Children's Commissioner for Wales showed that pupils in Gwynedd were more positive about the learning experiences they had during the lockdown period than that seen nationally. When asked the question, 'How confident do you feel about your learning', 59% of Gwynedd pupils felt confident or very confident in comparison with 51% throughout Wales.
- 4.10 Following the reopening of schools in September 2020, the Education Department and GwE have been proactive in supporting our schools to plan for different scenarios where schools may be moving into blended learning in part or in full for periods during the term in response to the COVID-19 situation at the level of a bubble, local school, area or in a situation where all schools have to close.
- 4.11 It is acknowledged that the curriculum was delayed during the first lockdown period, which led to a variation in the provision and learning experiences for our learners across the education system in Gwynedd. The variation in the conditions for learners and households must also be acknowledged, of course; from families with a number of children but limited access to digital devices, to parents working at home while at the same time trying to cater for and support their children with the remote learning provision, to parents being unable to support their children with the education provision, and vulnerable families where children would be encouraged to attend school to be looked after.
- 4.12 Estyn's Thematic Report on the work of the Local Authority to support schools and PRUs, during the pandemic states:
- In terms of continuity of learning during the pandemic, there is considerable variation in the successes of individual schools. In general, those schools that were causing concern prior to the pandemic are also the schools that have not operated that successfully during the pandemic. Support has continued for a number of secondary schools causing concern. For example, the accelerated improvement boards, chaired by the Head of Education, have begun to reconvene. Schools causing concern are discussed at the CQB meeting, where there is scrutiny and challenge. The Cabinet Member for Education continues to scrutinise the work of the service, taking advantage of opportunities to gather first-hand evidence through school visits. GwE and local authority officers have shared with him samples of schools' plans for learning from September. Overall, he feels that these plans reinforce the schools' pre-pandemic situations, namely that those schools that were operating most successfully at that time are the ones with the most robust plans at present.*
- 4.13 We are now in the middle of another lockdown, with the emphasis this time undoubtedly being on continuity of education and the curriculum, and once again, the Education Department has been proactive in encouraging schools to run live learning sessions in terms of promoting well-being, and enriching the learning experience for learners.
- 4.14 In addition, the Cabinet Member for Education has asked GwE for a report that will provide him with assurance regarding the consistency of experiences and consistency in the quality of education provided to learners across the school system in the context of blended learning, namely live learning sessions and distance learning provision. GwE will be able to discuss further the quality and consistency of the education provision in Gwynedd schools in Part B.