



## Report of the Director of Education

Education & Skills Policy Development Committee – 5 August 2020

# Covid-19 Summary of Feedback Received from Schools

<b>Purpose:</b>	To update the Education & Skills Policy Development Committee on feedback received from school staff during the period of school closures and the re-opening of schools in Swansea between March and July 2020.
<b>Report Author:</b>	Damien Beech, Head of Primary Phase Team
<b>Finance Officer:</b>	N/A
<b>Legal Officer:</b>	N/A
<b>Access to Services Officer:</b>	N/A
<b>For Information</b>	

### 1. Background

- 1.1 On 18 March 2020, Kirsty Williams, the Minister for Education in Wales, announced that schools were to close for the statutory provision of education at the latest on 20 March 2020.
- 1.2 As of 23 March 2020, schools were 're-purposed' and became emergency childcare settings to help support those most in need, including people involved in the immediate response to the coronavirus outbreak.
- 1.3 During the period of school closures for the purpose of statutory education, the priorities of the Welsh Government (WG), and all its partners across the education system, was to support:
  - the safety of all our learners and our education workforce;
  - the physical and mental health and well-being of all our learners and our education workforce;
  - the ability of all our learners to keep learning; and
  - learners' transition back into school and onto the next phase of their learning when the time comes.

- 1.4 The Education Directorate moved quickly to create an Emergency Education Board (EEB). Members of the EEB include senior officers from the Education Directorate and primary and secondary headteacher representatives. The EEB focussed on the priorities listed above and the provision of free school meals and summer childcare arrangements. Updates from the EEB were communicated to schools after each meeting via a newsletter. The EEB created a task and finish group to revise the original risk assessment and operational plan issued to schools at the start of the closure period. This group included headteachers officers, and school leadership trades unions. The revised documentation was shared with schools and was continually updated as part of the Re-opening of Schools Task & Finish Group's work (see below).
- 1.5 Whilst operating as emergency childcare settings, schools submitted detailed information each day, which included pupil and staff numbers present. The process also gave schools the opportunity to raise queries and concerns to which officers would respond with answers, support and guidance.
- 1.6 In April, a regional Continuity of Learning (COL) Plan Board was created and officers from both the primary and secondary phase teams joined the board to offer support and advice. In Swansea, a primary phase COL group was created to inform and develop progress in this area locally and regionally. This group included all members of the primary phase team and primary-headteacher representatives. A verbal update on continuity of learning in Swansea was given to the Education & Skills Policy Development Committee on 8 July 2020.
- 1.7 On 13 May 2020, the Children's Commissioner for Wales launched the 'Coronavirus and Me' consultation to find out about the experiences of children and young people in Wales. This consultation captured information about the lives of over 23,700 children between the ages of 3-18, and ran for a two-week period during which restrictions to keep communities in Wales safe had been in place for two months. The Children's Commissioner for Wales published an overview of the national findings on 8 June 2020. In addition to the national overview, each local authority (LA) received a report showing responses from respondents living in that local authority area only. The report contains a breakdown of responses to the majority of quantitative questions asked in the survey. It does not include responses to open ended comment questions, as these are still being analysed at the time of writing.
- 1.8 In May, the EEB created a large task and finish group focussing on the re-opening of schools to more pupils. This group's membership included councillors, LA officers, the relevant trades unions, and headteachers. The group has met weekly from its formation up to the end of the current academic year.

- 1.9 On 3 June 2020, the Minister for Education announced that all schools would re-open to offer their learners the opportunity to attend sessions to 'check in, catch up and prepare' (CICAP). Schools offered the sessions on a reduced basis taking into account the scientific advice available at the time and the measures that needed to be put in place to help reduce the risk of transmission. To give schools a better understanding of the number of pupils to anticipate, the Re-opening of Schools Task and Finish Group issued a survey to all parents and carers in Swansea. The survey asked whether parents and carers would be sending their children back to school for CICAP sessions, what they would like to see in place in terms of safety measures and what their concerns were. It also took the opportunity to ask respondents their views on the distance learning offer from their child's school.
- 1.10 The primary phase COL and Re-opening of Schools Task and Finish groups issued surveys to school leaders relating to approaches to COL, concerns about the wellbeing of pupils and staff, and their views about the re-opening of schools in the summer term to support planning for the autumn term 2020. In the secondary phase, the views of school leaders were regularly captured and shared through Swansea's Curriculum, Assessment and School Evaluation Network (SCASEN).
- 1.11 Throughout the closure and re-opening period, senior officers from the LA have met regularly with trades unions representatives.

## **2. Briefing/Main body of the report**

### **Continuity of Learning**

- 2.1 The original survey (sent to primary schools) carried out in May/June 2020 showed a range of approaches are being used effectively in primary schools in Swansea. However, schools want more professional development for their staff. The LA has provided two webinars. The first focussed on what online tools are available to teachers. The second was a blended learning walkthrough (modelling good approaches to use). The webinars had a combined total of 640 attendees. As they were recorded they can still be accessed by those who did not attend. Both webinars received positive feedback with some schools requesting whole staff training via Teams.
- 2.2 Further support was also requested in the following areas:
- assessment;
  - ideas on engaging pupils/families who are currently not engaging;
  - sharing good practice, resources and ideas;
  - ensuring continuity in teaching of early reading and maths;
  - and

- giving effective feedback to pupils.

Future webinars are being prepared for the autumn term, focussing specifically on the areas above and Swansea teachers will be presenting with LA officers.

- 2.3 There are common themes from school responses that have promoted distance learning. These include:
- clear, regular communication with children and parents/carers;
  - timely feedback for pupils;
  - a range of approaches, not just digital/online learning successfully engage pupils;
  - providing a balance of focused tasks and open-ended activities and providing opportunities for learners to collaborate remotely; and
  - an acute awareness of pupils' wellbeing and to ensure pupils do not feel under pressure.
- 2.4 The survey responses were shared with primary headteachers, thus sharing good practice, resources and ideas as requested by schools. Good practice was shared with secondary schools through the secondary phase team's senior leaders' network (SCASEN).
- 2.5 The Re-opening of Schools Group issued an updated COL survey to all Swansea schools mid-way through July. At the time of writing, there are only 22 responses (most likely due to the fact schools in Swansea have now closed for the summer break). The survey aimed to find out levels of engagement, gather further examples of good practice, and identify what support is needed. Early responses suggest:
- variable levels of engagement of pupils with distance (blended) learning, ranging from as little as 10% engagement to around 90%;
  - school approaches to blended learning are evolving as staff and pupils develop their digital competence. For example, more use of videos and live streaming sessions;
  - schools have used the CICUP sessions to develop the digital competence of pupils;
  - there is now greater engagement with pupils who were considered 'digitally excluded' thanks to the loaning of IT equipment and devices that enable WiFi connectivity; and
  - a few schools are developing useful methods of tracking progress and engagement.
  - A few schools need more IT equipment and schools would like support in communicating reasonable expectations with families. For example, in explaining why streaming live sessions all of the time is not practical or necessarily the best approach in engaging with all learners. Other requests for support echo the findings of the initial COL survey.

The survey will remain open until the end of August.

### **‘Coronavirus and Me’ Local Authority Report**

- 2.6 Appendix A contains a summary of the findings of the Swansea LA report. 2,205 children and young people completed the survey in Swansea, the second-highest total in Wales. This equates to roughly 5.7% of the targeted age range of 3 to 18-year-olds. The information was shared with schools in June. School leaders used the information to inform their planning as they prepared for the return of pupils in the CICUP sessions. For example, 75% of Year 6 respondents said they wanted to return to their primary school to say goodbye. As a result, primary headteachers prioritised this year group.

### **Parent/Carer survey**

- 2.7 This survey received 13,257 responses. Headline data indicated:
- 38% were happy to send their children back to school to attend CICUP sessions;
  - 27% did not intend to send their children back to school for CICUP sessions;
  - 36% were undecided;
  - 83% were happy with the home/distance learning offer from their child’s school; and
  - 91% said their child had completed school work during the lockdown period.
- 2.8 Data and systems officers from the Performance Team sent each school the responses related specifically to them. Headteachers reported that this was very useful information and helped inform their plans and what schools communicated to families in preparation for the re-opening of schools.

### **Wellbeing Survey**

- 2.9 The Re-opening of Schools Task & Finish Group issued this survey in July. At the time of writing, there are only 22 responses (most likely due to the fact schools in Swansea have now closed for the summer break). The survey aimed to find out future requirements for supporting emotional and psychological wellbeing. The survey will remain open until the end of August. Early responses are:
- school leaders are concerned about the lack of engagement of vulnerable families (in terms of maintaining contact with the school and supporting children with home learning);
  - school leaders believe the lack of routine and structure of school has led to increased anxiety (pupils and parents) and an escalation of disruptive behaviour that some families find difficult to manage;

- a few schools report an increase in reported instances of domestic violence;
- a few schools are concerned about the lack of support for families. Schools would usually signpost parents to agencies that can help them. A number of schools reported that they had given families extra food, toys, books, and clothing.
- schools report they continue to liaise and work with colleagues in the Education Welfare Service, Child and Family Service and the police;
- schools have signposted families to their local foodbanks when necessary;
- common worries amongst pupils reflect the Coronavirus & Me responses, i.e. missing friends and family, falling behind with their learning, transition to secondary schools etc;
- all schools report that for the pupils who did return for CICUP sessions, though nervous initially it has been a positive experience for pupils and staff;
- schools would like professional development in understanding and supporting pupils and staff who have experienced trauma; and
- other development needs include resilience, bereavement and cognitive behaviour therapy training.

2.10 It is worth noting that Swansea's Educational Psychology Service issued guidance on bereavement, loss and critical incidents to all schools in April.

### **Return to School Survey**

2.11 The Re-opening of Schools Task & Finish Group issued this survey in July. At the time of writing, there are only 34 responses (most likely due to the fact schools in Swansea have now closed for the summer break). The survey aimed to provide information to plan for autumn 2020 and was issued before the Welsh Government published its operational and learning guidance for the new school year. Responses are:

- schools found the LA operational guidance, risk assessment, Frequently Asked Questions, and information for staff/pupils/parents useful – 4.76 average rating (1 being not useful and 5 being very useful);
- schools would have liked the documentation sooner but acknowledge the difficult timescales and the need to reflect WG guidance;
- a few headteachers commented that the amount of information was sometimes overwhelming, but there is general appreciation of the efforts to communicate with schools;
- the use of Teams to conduct meetings was well received; and
- headteachers found the time between WG announcements and the publication of supporting guidance a challenge when

planning to re-open schools. The confusion regarding a three or four-week return was also unhelpful. However, one headteacher felt the 'authority did us proud' by making a decision regarding the issue and giving schools the steer they sought. Others also appreciated the corporate approach to issues such as which year groups to prioritise but would have liked the decisions to have been made sooner.

2.12 Other challenges included:

- providing emergency childcare at the same time as preparing for and providing the CICUP sessions whilst continuing to maintain contact with families and plan and deliver blended learning;
- what to advise staff who were shielding or vulnerable;
- communicating with families for whom English or Welsh is not the language of the home;
- providing 'grab and go bags' to families eligible for free school meals; and
- providing a consistent approach to the eligibility of the long list of 'critical workers'.

2.13 In the autumn term and beyond, schools want:

- to reflect on what has and has not worked well and to share good practice and ideas;
- continued collaboration between schools and the LA;
- continued support from key officers;
- consistent, clear messages and approaches that all schools adhere to;
- continued use of Teams to conduct meetings when possible;
- equity of voice, ensuring officers listen to the views of all headteachers;
- a central area on Hwb to store documents and newsletters; and
- readily available supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE).

### **Meetings with the trades unions**

2.14 During lockdown, teaching staff reported to their trades unions that the approach to blended learning was difficult to achieve within a home-working environment. A few staff report that they lacked confidence in delivering synchronous lessons. When checking pupils' wellbeing, it was noted that staff making contact with families should speak with other adults present. Non-teaching staff were comfortable to work additional hours and were paid for any additional hours they worked. Teachers were willing to volunteer to work at weekends or holidays and were often placed on a rota to attend emergency childcare settings. Headteachers noted that engagement with remote learning was patchy. In secondary schools, adaptations were made to combat barriers to learning.

### **3. Conclusions/Key Points Summary**

- 3.1 Since schools closed for the provision of statutory education in March to their re-opening in late June and through to the end of the academic year, schools and officers have undertaken a considerable amount of work in unprecedented and extremely challenging circumstances.
- 3.2 During this period, schools and the local authority have had to change many of their usual ways of working and many elements have become the 'new normal' and will likely continue. For example, the use of technology to conduct meetings and the development of blended-learning approaches.
- 3.3 The work of the various groups has encouraged greater collaboration and understanding between all involved and this should continue in the new school year and beyond. The LA will consider the responses and views of all stakeholders and use these to refine and improve services on offer in Swansea.

### **4. Equality and Engagement Implications**

- 4.1 The Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (Wales) and must, in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
  - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
  - Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Our Equality Impact Assessment process ensures that we have paid due regard to the above.

### **5. Legal Implications**

There are no legal implications.

### **6. Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications.

**Background Papers:** None

**Appendices:** Appendix A – *Coronavirus & Me Survey info (Wales & Swansea)*, Swansea Council, Education Directorate, June 2020.