

**SUBJECT:** Report on the progress of blended learning in Monmouthshire schools

**DIRECTORATE:** Children and Young People

**MEETING:** Children and Young People Select Committee

**DATE:** 13<sup>th</sup> October 2020

## **1. PURPOSE:**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members of the Children and Young People Select Committee with an interim update on progress towards the development of approaches to support effective blended learning in Monmouthshire schools.

## **2. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

2.1 Select Members scrutinise the report and take the opportunity to comment on the contents.

2.2 The Children and Young People Directorate provide Members with a progress report in January 2021.

## **3. KEY ISSUES:**

3.1 All schools and settings across Wales closed for normal business on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 in response to the growing spread of Covid-19 and as a result, we saw a dramatic disruption to our education system. Schools were immediately repurposed as childcare hubs for the children of key workers. This meant that almost all learners were not able to attend schools during this challenging time. However, education remained of central importance to wellbeing and the continuity of learning.

3.2 All schools provided home tasks for learners soon after schools were closed. Over time, it became clear that the range of tasks and the methods of delivery varied across our schools and between phases and this depended largely on the digital capacity of the school. Since the start of the pandemic, all schools have developed their capacity to deliver worthwhile activities using a range of digital strategies.

3.3 As our response to Covid-19 changes, schools have started to adapt their curriculum to include more traditional in school face-to-face contact sessions alongside distance learning strategies such as, live streaming and recorded lessons. This 'blended learning' approach will enable schools to maintain the continuity of learning as the balance between in school sessions, and the time spent learning elsewhere, changes over time.

3.5 Blended learning is evolving in all of our schools and not all are at the same stage of the journey. The practical management requirements at the start of the autumn term to ensure staff and pupils' safety and wellbeing has been more challenging than

anticipated in some schools and this has had an impact on progress towards securing blended learning further.

3.7 Since the start of the pandemic, the Local Authority has routinely gathered information about the progress our schools are making towards implementing strategies for distance learning and developing bespoke approaches to blended learning. As a result, we have a good understanding of current provision across the county. The development of a regional framework to support and review the quality of teaching and learning through a blended approach will give us a better understanding of how effective practice is in our schools and the impact it has on pupil progress.

#### **4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

4.1 The Education Achievement Service (EAS) is our commissioned School Improvement Service, providing support to all Monmouthshire schools. Since the start of the pandemic, the EAS has provided on-going advice and support to enable schools to develop their bespoke approach to blended learning. It is anticipated that this level of support will continue for the foreseeable future.

4.2 There will be a need for Local Authority Officers to increase the level of monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the blended learning approaches implemented by schools is of good quality and has a positive impact on learning.

#### **5. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS:**

5.1 Securing effective models of blended learning in our schools is central to maintain the continuity of learning during the on-going pandemic.

5.2 Looking further into the future, effective blended learning will support teachers in developing a more integrated approach to teaching and learning in line with expectations for the delivery of Curriculum for Wales.

#### **6 SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS:**

6.1 From the start of the pandemic, the risks to some children and adults increased due to lockdown and at the same time, opportunities for issues to be identified and referred reduced. Officers from Education, Inclusion and Children's services worked in close partnership to ensure that children at increased risk were contacted, monitored and supported regularly to minimise these risks. In order to support early identification, the Local Authority updated the model School Safeguarding Policy to include additional advice for schools relating to abuse and neglect resulting from Covid-19.

6.2 As schools began to move towards a distance learning model during lockdown, the Local Authority developed guidance and protocols to support professionals deliver learning on-line, whilst ensuring learners are kept safe at all times.

## **7 CONSULTTEES:**

7.1 Children and Young People Departmental Management Team

## **8 BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

Stay Safe, Stay Learning: continuity of learning policy statement

<https://gov.wales/stay-safe-stay-learning>

Stay Safe, Stay Learning: supporting the education system

<https://gov.wales/stay-safe-stay-learning-supporting-education-system-html>

Guidance on learning in schools and settings in the autumn term

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/guidance-learning-schools-settings-from-autum-term.pdf>

Models of Blended Learning

<https://sewales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Models-of-blended-learning-compressed.pdf>

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# Interim Progress Report - Developing Effective Blended Learning Models in Monmouthshire Schools.

## 1. Background and Context

All schools and settings across Wales closed for normal business on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 in response to the growing spread of Covid-19. Immediately following this, we repurposed our schools to establish seven childcare hubs to look after the children of key workers from Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and as a result, we saw a dramatic disruption to our education system.

Almost learners were not able to attend schools during this challenging time. However, education remained of central importance to wellbeing and continuity of learning.

The Welsh Government set out priorities for our education system in the Stay Safe, Stay Learning policy statement for the period when most learners were not able to attend schools and settings in person.



Stay Safe. Stay Learning:  
Continuity of learning policy statement

These priorities are 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
- learners transition back into school or setting and onto the next phase of their learning when the time comes.



Within the first two weeks of lockdown, the Local Authority carried out a survey of digital provision in schools and how it was being used to support learning, communication and leadership functions. This survey indicated that all schools in Monmouthshire were providing learners with opportunities to engage in activities so that they could keep learning at home but the range of activities and the use of digital platforms varied between schools and across phases. This was because, at this time, schools were at very different stages of developing digital learning due to contextual limitations and workforce capacity.

During the summer term, schools took steps to develop their capacity to deliver distance learning through a range of models and utilising a range of strategies. This included staff skills and resource audits, providing upskilling sessions for staff and pupils, participating in webinars and wider professional learning and developing whole school Distance Learning Policies.

At the end of the summer term 2020, schools began to welcome groups of learners back to 'check-in, check-up and prepare'. Schools used this time appropriately to focus on learner and staff wellbeing, evaluate the impact of the extended absence from school and upskill learners so that they could feel well prepared and confident on their return in September 2020.



Guidance on learning in  
schools and settings from  
the autumn term

The Welsh Government published guidance to support schools in developing their approach to learning from September. This guidance outlined high-level expectations for schools in developing approaches to curriculum delivery that will be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances so that learning both in school and elsewhere as the need arises.



In thinking about the approach to learning schools may wish to consider their priorities for learning in the context of the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, alongside the needs of their learners. The guidance recognises that the development of new approaches by schools will continue to evolve over time.

More recently, Estyn and the four regional consortia issued detailed guidance titled 'Models of Blended Learning'. This guidance explores a range of strategies for schools to consider and adapt to develop a bespoke approach to blended learning, which suits the context of the school and the need of their learners.



As a result, schools are adapting their curriculum planning to include in-school face-to-face contact sessions and distance learning strategies such as live streaming and recorded lessons. This 'blended learning' approach can be flexible as the balance between learning in schools and the time spent learning elsewhere changes over time.

Blended learning is evolving in all of our schools and not all are at the same stage of the journey. The practical management requirements at the start of the autumn term to ensure staff and pupils' safety and wellbeing has been more challenging than anticipated in some schools and this has had an impact on progress towards securing blended learning further. As a result, school leaders understandably prioritised safety and wellbeing during the first few weeks of the term.

## 2. Progress to Date

Since the start of the pandemic, all key partners have worked together to ensure that learners have every opportunity to engage in high quality learning experiences whether this is school or elsewhere. The following summary provides an outline of the actions that have been taken to support schools to realise this ambition.

- From the beginning of lockdown, the Local Authority established a programme of weekly meetings with Headteachers. These meetings provided a purposeful platform for consulting on, and signposting, key documents for schools and to review emerging guidance. This included the development and delivery of a blended learning approach.
- An update on the development of distance learning became a standing agenda item for Local Authority Wellbeing Meetings with schools. This provided an opportunity for schools to share the progress they had made in developing distance learning and secure additional support from the Local Authority or EAS as required.

- The Local Authority carried out an audit of digital connectivity to identify learners without access digital connectivity at home. In response, the Local Authority were able to locate and distribute a small number of laptops and repurpose others, provide access to school platforms using a range of alternative devices and provide additional funding to schools to purchase Myfi for families without a means to connect to the internet.
- Many staff working in Monmouthshire schools had either a laptop or secure access to Hwb before the start of the pandemic enabling them to work from home to plan and prepare activities for learners. Where this was not the case, the EAS supported schools requiring additional access to Hwb and with the provision of enhanced digital skills training in the form of playlists. Use of Hwb but Monmouthshire has increased significantly over the last six months with one of our schools being the highest user across the region.
- In June, our Youth Service collected the views of young people to gain a better understanding of what it felt like to be at home and learning at a distance, what was working well and what could be improved. Most young people felt that tasks were beneficial and enjoyed learning at home however, the range of platforms being used by schools was challenging for some pupils and others felt the balance of work across the week could be improved. Feedback from this survey was shared informally with schools and officers so that it could use it to refine blended learning approaches and the nature of wider support.
- The Local Authority has set out clear expectations and the timeline for the development, delivery and evaluation of an effective blended learning approach with Headteachers. There is a shared understanding that schools will have a blended learning strategy in place by the end of October 2020 and that we will begin to evaluate the quality and impact on learners in November and December 2020.
- At the start of the summer term, the EAS carried out a regional distance learning audit to identify professional learning requirements and identify aspects of practice worth sharing. Based on this information, the EAS developed a range of innovative professional learning opportunities to support schools in developing a range of effective distance learning strategies. The EAS have also provided access to a range of high-quality resources, guidance for practitioners.
- From the outset of school closures, the EAS provided school leaders with weekly playlists containing advice, guidance and support to further develop approaches to distance and blended learning.
- To supplement nationally released materials, the EAS provided all schools with additional examples of models for distance learning to support them in prioritising wellbeing and establishing realistic expectations for all learners at each phase of education.
- Nearly all Monmouthshire schools have participated in EAS professional learning since the beginning of April. Many schools have prioritised professional learning in two main areas. Firstly, to ensure all staff have the knowledge and skills to support learner well-being and secondly, to upskill practitioners in the digital skills necessary to support high quality blended learning. A few Monmouthshire schools have supported the dissemination of training for Teaching Assistants.
- The EAS created a checklist for schools to review and refine their current approaches to 'continuity in learning' and well-being. The self-evaluation checklist was developed with

reference to several international rapid research reviews that take into consideration the response from countries across the world

- The EAS has provided resources and guidance materials for schools in supporting the recovery to school by addressing the 5 Rs: Regrouping, reflection, renewal, relationships and relaxation.
- The EAS has continued to support schools in planning for learning in relation to Curriculum for Wales. This has included the development of high quality online professional learning materials for senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers to ensure that all practitioners understand the guidance published in January 2020. There have also been a series of planned webinars to provide a forum where teachers and school leaders can ask questions and find out more about the curriculum framework.
- EAS support to develop effective strategies for teaching and learning has continued, in the context of distance learning. This has included the blend of some class-based learning (synchronous) and some online (synchronous and asynchronous) learning. In addition, a range of guidance and professional learning has been provided for schools on what effective pedagogies could support the approach to 'blended learning'. This has included bespoke follow-up support for identified schools, including all secondary schools currently involved in the regional teaching and learning pilot programme.
- The Local Authority and EAS are in the process of surveying the current position of blended learning in schools. The outcomes of this survey will not be available the end of October. However early indications, from the responses received to date, suggest that schools are making progress in developing blended learning approaches.
- A regional quality assurance group has been established, consisting of EAS staff and leaders from across a range of schools. The group will build on the existing national and regional guidance to develop a quality assurance model to support high-quality, consistent blended and distance learning provision. This means that, until this quality assurance framework is in place, it will be difficult to provide an accurate and evidence based picture of the quality and impact of the blended learning approaches implemented by our schools.

### 3 Conclusions

1. Schools are at different stages of the journey towards implementing a blended learning approach. However, all schools have moved forward compared to their individual starting point at the beginning of the pandemic.
2. The practical management requirements at the start of the autumn term to ensure staff and pupils' safety and wellbeing has been more challenging than anticipated in some schools and this has had an impact on progress towards securing blended learning further
3. Schools have been well supported by the EAS through the provision of advice, guidance and professional learning to develop an effective blended learning strategy to match the context and meet the needs of their learners.
4. Most schools are still in the process of planning and developing their approaches to blended learning. This means that the Local Authority will not be able to begin to develop an accurate picture of blended learning across all schools until it has an

opportunity review individual school development plans and meet with schools leaders.

5. The development of a regional framework to support and review the quality of teaching and learning through a blended approach will give us a better understanding of how effective practice is in our schools and the impact it has on pupil progress.

#### 4. Next Steps

1. The EAS will continue to provide support and guidance to schools as they develop their individual approaches to blended learning.
2. The Local Authority will review all school development plans to gain a good understanding of where each individual school in relation to the development of blended learning.
3. The Local Authority will also meet with a selection of schools to discuss plans in detail to identify good practice and where necessary provide support to accelerate progress.
4. Evaluate outcomes from the blended learning survey to identify areas of strength and inform the Local Authority and EAS strategy to development and deliver future support.
5. Use the quality assurance model to evaluate the quality of teaching using a blended approach and the impact on pupil progress.
6. Provide a full report to Members of Select when all relevant information becomes available.