

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday 11 th May 2023
Report Subject	Tackling the impact of inequality on educational outcomes
Cabinet Member	Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure
Report Author	Chief Officer (Education & Youth)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been developed to provide an overview of the national issue relating to the achievement gap between children who are from more affluent households and those who are from more disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly by the time learners take their GCSE examinations at the end of the statutory period of education.

The report has been developed in response to interest from members on this issue and focuses on some of the national research on the impacts of poverty. Closing the achievement gap is a high priority for national policy makers in Wales and across the UK. The report references aspects of Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy and how this is being delivered in our schools.

The report also outlines how the Council is taking a cross-portfolio approach to tackling poverty and disadvantage by having it as a key theme in its current Council Plan and its revised plan for 2023-2028. It describes how the Education and Youth Portfolio is contributing to those priorities through its operational activity and support for schools. The aim is to assist schools in tackling inequalities in educational outcomes because of poverty and disadvantage by promoting, first and foremost, high quality teaching and assessment in every class in every school to meet the needs of every learner. The other key area of focus is to ensure that schools are using targeted grant funding provided by the Welsh Government to remove barriers to learning and engagement and deliver additional interventions to enhance the knowledge and skills of learners who need extra support to make good progress and achieve their potential, which may be inhibited by the economic circumstances of their families.

It is important to recognise that schools, and the Council as a whole, cannot close the disadvantage gap on their own. The root causes of poverty are varied and complex and it will require a dedicated focus by government across a wide range of policy areas. However, by having poverty in its many forms as a key focus within the Council Plan, members should be reassured that all portfolios, including Education and Youth, are determined to make a positive difference on the lives of families in Flintshire and outcomes for learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Members confirm they have received an appropriate level of assurance regarding the work of the Education & Youth Portfolio in supporting schools to tackle the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their learners.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE
1.01	<p>The key indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in households where income is below 60% of the median UK household income after housing costs have been deducted. Welsh Government uses a wider set of indicators to measure progress within its Child Poverty Strategy. Some of those related to education are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of children living in low-income households who are reaching health, social and cognitive development milestones when entering formal education • Percentage of learners aged 7 years achieving the expected level of educational outcomes • Percentage of learners achieving the expected level of educational outcomes at the end of statutory education (age 16). • Percentage of young people (16-18 and 19-24) who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) <p>The collection of data sets outlined above were not made in 2020 and 2021 as a result of the pandemic and school closures. Welsh Government notes that the latest reliable poverty statistics for Wales are for the three financial years 2018 to 2020. These show that an estimated 31% of children in Wales were living in income poverty. This equates to approximately 190,000 dependent children under the age of 19.</p>
1.02	<p>In July 2022, new research was published by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) into the impact of educational inequalities across England and Wales. The research focused on GCSE outcomes over the last 10 years as a measure of educational inequality.</p> <p>Whilst making comparisons across Wales and England can be challenging due to different reforms to examination and performance measures across the two nations over time, the report identified that Welsh learners suffer a</p>

	<p>wider disadvantage gap at GCSE than learners in England, but that both nations have made only modest progress in closing this gap. The “disadvantage gap” is used as the main measure for determining progress in reducing inequalities in education.</p> <p>EPI research found that Wales’ disadvantage gap in GCSEs in 2019 stood at 22-23 months of pupil progress, compared to England’s progress gap of 18 months. In 2011, corresponding figures were 24 months in Wales and 20 months in England. For pupils who are persistently disadvantaged, i.e. eligible for free school meals for 80% of their time in school, the gap is 29 months in Wales and 23 months in England. The report’s conclusions are stark – pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to reach the top quintile of GCSE scores and are more likely to be in the bottom quintile in both England and Wales, but with less mobility in Wales.</p> <p>The report does not find any evidence that this difference is as a result of policy divergences between the two nations and concludes that “the drivers of a higher disadvantage gap in Wales predate 2010”. It also recognises that the effects of some policy changes are still to be felt, notably the implementation of the new curriculum in Wales and recent changes to assessment. Looking forward, the report points to clear lessons from academic research on the most effective ways to reduce educational inequalities in schools.</p> <p>These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target more funding at schools with higher levels of deprivation • Target more of that funding on pupils who experience persistent disadvantage • Focus on teacher quality and professional development to improve the quality of teaching overall • Develop strategies and funding mechanisms to deploy the highest quality teachers in the most deprived schools • High effectiveness of one-to-one and small group tutoring • Frequent teacher feedback, use of data to guide instruction, high-dosage tutoring, increased instructional time and establishing a culture of high expectations. <p>The report concludes by emphasising the importance of recognising that schools are “unlikely to be able to close the disadvantage gap on their own” and points to the need to have a wider focus on child poverty and the particular importance particularly of early years and children’s services.</p>
1.03	<p>A core aim for the Education Portfolio, in conjunction with its school improvement partner GwE, is to assist schools in tackling inequalities in educational outcomes as a result of poverty and disadvantage by promoting, first and foremost, high quality teaching and assessment in every class in every school to meet the needs of every learner. The mechanism for this to promote strong leadership at all levels within schools, which is focused on improving teaching and learning to improve outcomes for learners, and by providing high quality professional development for all staff working with learners so that their interventions are effective.</p>

	<p>The other key area of focus is to ensure that schools are using targeted grant funding provided by the Welsh Government to remove barriers to learning and engagement and deliver additional interventions to enhance the knowledge and skills of learners who need extra support to make good progress and achieve their potential, which may be inhibited by the economic circumstances of their families.</p> <p>Based on effective and regular evaluation of their performance in improving outcomes for learners, all schools will have priorities to continuously improve the quality of their provision, which in turn, should have a positive impact on mitigating the impacts of poverty and disadvantage on pupil achievement.</p>
1.04	<p>Objective 3 of the Welsh Government’s Child Poverty strategy focuses on reducing the inequalities which exist in health, education and economic outcomes for children and families. The strategy also includes a focus on the early years, recognising that investment in the early years of a child’s life not only can make an important impact on better health and developmental outcomes, but also positively influence outcomes later in life.</p> <p>Welsh Government commissioned the Wales Centre for Public Policy to undertake a review of what works in tackling poverty. Their report, <i>Poverty and social exclusion: A Way forward</i>, published in September 2022, identified 4 key areas of focus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reducing costs and maximising income for families 2. Developing pathways out of poverty by enabling wider socio-economic participation 3. Creating an enabling environment 4. Addressing the mental load and mental health affecting people living in poverty and social exclusion
1.05	<p>Flintshire County Council recognises the significant impact that poverty, in its many forms, has on its children, young people, families and communities. This provides the rationale for the major focus on poverty through the strategic improvement priorities in the current Council Plan and in the revised plan for 2023-2028.</p> <p>The Council Plan sets out the Council’s priorities under six themes: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Affordable and Accessible Housing • Green Society and Environment • Economy • Personal and Community Well-being • Education and Skills <p>The Well-being Objective for Poverty is defined as ‘Protecting people from poverty by supporting them to meet their basic needs’. The areas contributing to achieving this are contained within the following five priorities: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income Poverty • Child Poverty • Food Poverty

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fuel Poverty • Digital Poverty <p>The Council Plan outlines the core activities being taken currently, and in the future, to deliver on these themes. A number of activities sit within the Education and Skills section of the plan. During the current reporting year, achievement against this priority are being measured through targets related to reducing the cost burden for families when their children are in school. Those achievement measures include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Making the processes for claiming free school meals as simple and straightforward as possible to increase the percentage of take-up against entitlement b) Encouraging take-up of the free school breakfast for year seven pupils eligible for free school meals c) Maximising take-up of the school uniform grant d) Developing a network of school uniform exchanges across the county supported by enhanced web and social media promotion <p>Progress against these priorities for 2022-23 are reported through the quarterly performance reports to Scrutiny and Cabinet with the annual summary report for 2022-23 due to be published in June. Officers and members are currently finalising the priorities and achievement measures for the next version of the Council Plan covering the period 2023-2028.</p>
1.06	<p>The most recent inspection by Estyn (2019) of the Council's education services was favourable and is available on the Estyn website. It notes that overall, pupils in Flintshire make sound progress during their time in statutory education.</p> <p>Estyn noted that pupils in Flintshire who are eligible for free school meals generally perform broadly in line with the same group of pupils across Wales. Estyn noted that the performance of other vulnerable groups of pupils had improved over the previous three years. In particular, the percentage of children who are 'looked after' who gain a recognised qualification had increased.</p> <p>However, when looking at attendance in 2019, Estyn noted that attendance of pupils in both primary and secondary schools did not compare well with levels in similar local authorities and the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was weaker in Flintshire schools than that of similar pupils across Wales. One of the recommendations, therefore, from that inspection was to increase attendance in both primary and secondary schools. Regular reports regarding pupil attendance are brought to this committee for members to consider and a detailed overview is included in the Annual Self-Evaluation report of the Education Portfolio, which is reviewed by this committee, the Cabinet and by Estyn.</p>
1.07	<p>It has been recognised that childrens' learning was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools closed for long periods of time and children had to adapt to new ways of learning. Evidence is increasingly suggesting that learning and development has been set back by the pandemic and even more acutely for children from lower income households.</p>

	<p>In March of this year, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language set out a range of measures to tackle the impact of poverty on educational attainment. These involve investment in creating Community Focussed schools, teacher education programmes and the strengthening of teaching support staff through high quality professional learning programmes. The Minister’s statement reinforced the fact that research and inspection evidence “reveals that the single most important influence on learner success within the education system is the quality of learning and teaching”.</p>
1.08	<p>The Pupil Development Grant provided by Welsh Government continues to provide schools and settings with additional financial support in their efforts to tackle barriers created by poverty and disadvantage. Funding across Wales through this grant for 2022-2023 was over £130 million pounds.</p> <p>The number of school aged pupils entitled to Free School Meals (e-FSM) in Flintshire increased from 13.47% in 2019 (Wales 2019 average 15.96%) to 20.41% in 2022. This figure is now much closer to the current Welsh average of 20.52%.</p> <p>Individual schools are required to demonstrate how they spend their allocated Pupil Development Grant funding each year. The amount of funding for each school is calculated by Welsh Government and there is national and regional guidance for schools on the implementation of this grant. Each school is required to publish their Pupil Development Grant funds and priorities on a yearly basis. This can be done via the school’s website / school prospectus, or it can be sent to GwE and published on the regional website.</p> <p>The Supporting Improvement Adviser for each school quality assures the use of the grant and its impact on vulnerable learners. This information has been used to identify successful practice in schools locally and across the region and feeds into the business planning cycle of the region to ensure that interventions are put in place to address any identified areas of improvement.</p> <p>The Early Years element of the Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG) is administered by the Council and has been used by the Early Entitlement Team for the professional development of the non-maintained workforce. This has included using the grant to provide each non-maintained Early Entitlement (EE) setting with funding to be used specifically to support the engagement, well-being and performance of disadvantaged learners. Non-maintained EE setting staff are supported to consider the needs of disadvantaged learners in their own settings and to identify appropriate resources to develop the specific skills of those individual children.</p> <p>The School Essential Grant (previously the Pupil Access Grant) provides assistance through a grant for eligible families to help with the cost of school uniform, sports kit, kit for enrichment activities and other equipment. £225 is available for each eligible learner in each school year group, except for those entering Year 7 where the grant is increased to £300. In response to the cost-of-living crisis, an additional one-off payment in 2022-2023 of £100 was announced for eligible children.</p>

1.09	<p>Since the cycle of Estyn inspections in schools resumed last September, after the pause due to the pandemic, 10 Flintshire schools have been inspected and their reports published. In each of those reports, Estyn recognises the positive use of the Pupil Development Grant funding.</p> <p>For example, in one school, Estyn notes that the</p> <p><i>“School monitors and allocates the pupil development grant and other additional funding carefully, ensuring a range of valuable support programmes to help the emotional and social development of vulnerable pupils”</i></p> <p>and in another, that;</p> <p><i>“Leaders use the pupil development grant to put in place a range of measures to address the impact of poverty such as the use of additional adults to support learning through intervention groups and subsidising outdoor adventure visits.”</i></p>
1.10	<p>In early March 2020, the then Children’s Commissioner for Wales was the keynote speaker at the Flintshire Headteacher Conference where poverty and its impact on children in school was the main theme.</p> <p>During that conference, a commitment was made by the Council to promote resources provided by the Commissioner’s office to address issues of poverty with our schools. All schools signed a pledge at the conference to adopt this approach.</p> <p>The resource produced by the Commissioner, “Check with Ceri”, is an assessment tool for schools to consider the financial impact additional activities routinely undertaken in schools can have on families.</p> <p>Ceri is a fictional character who represents a child or young person whose family do not have enough money to afford the things they need, and who may miss out on their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) because of this. The resource encourages children, young people and adults at a school to take part in the “Check with Ceri” activity, which is designed to help them to think about what costs might be difficult for Ceri and their family to afford both over the course of the school day, and over the school year. The resource then encourages them to work together to come up with ideas for what more the school might be able to do to help. The resource is suitable for use in lessons with pupils and for use by the School Council.</p> <p>Unfortunately, the week after the conference the country went into lockdown as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and statutory education was disrupted. It is likely that the use of this resource has not been well embedded in Flintshire schools because school leaders and teachers had to focus on managing the pandemic and delivering learning in different ways. Relaunching the ‘Ask Ceri’ resource, now that schools have settled back into normal operations is a priority through the revised Council Plan.</p>

1.11	<p>In Estyn’s Annual Report for 2021-2022 the Chief Inspector highlighted that that some providers were particularly effective at tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their learners. The report notes</p> <p><i>“Even though these providers worked to alleviate the specific impact of poverty through provision such as free or affordable school uniform for all, food banks, affordable proms and so on, the main thrust of their work was on delivering high quality provision for all their learners, regardless of their backgrounds and on removing barriers to learning so that all learners had equitable experiences and chances”</i></p> <p>One of the case studies used by Estyn to exemplify this positive work was from the inspection of the Flintshire and Wrexham Adult Community Learning Partnership. The Annual Report noted that:</p> <p><i>“The providers offered comprehensive well-being provision that was tailored to the needs of individual learners and helped to remove barriers to learning. For example, the Wrexham and Flintshire adult learning in the community partnership provides a good balance and useful range of courses for adults who want to become re-engaged with education, to improve their job prospects, upgrade their English language skills (English for speakers of other languages – ESOL), develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills or improve their health and well-being. Courses are provided in a variety of appropriate locations, including centres in community venues in rural and urban areas across the two local authority areas. The partnership uses non-accredited short courses well to attract hard-to-reach learners who are less confident about entering or returning to education and training. There is also a small but growing family learning provision, where parents and their children play and learn together, for example through learning the heritage skills of wool felting at the children’s schools.”</i></p> <p>Improving educational outcomes for adults, many of whom will be parents, is an effective way to increase their economic activity which then has a positive impact on their children, helping to break the cycle of poverty and underachievement.</p>
1.12	<p>Over the last two years, £11.5 million has been allocated for Adult Community Learning. Welsh Government are currently working with partners on the delivery of five new ‘Citizens Curriculum’ pilots that will look to tackle barriers that prevent wider adult learner participation. Flintshire’s Adult Community Learning (ACL) partnership with Wrexham (North East Wales ACL) was recently successful in bidding to deliver the North Wales pilot of this work.</p>
1.13	<p>As part of its commitment to addressing poverty, Welsh Government funds free period products in schools, colleges and communities across Wales. There is clear evidence that the unavailability of appropriate products to help learners manage menstruation because of poverty has an adverse impact on their attendance and subsequently their educational achievement. Through the Period Dignity Grant Flintshire, received an allocation of £143,786.00 for 2022-23.</p> <p>The Healthy Schools Team within the Education Portfolio commissioned an external company to deliver period product ‘home packs’ direct to homes of</p>

	<p>girls and young women aged 8-18 years that attend a Flintshire school. This also includes pupils who are in elective home education. This funding enables all female pupils in Flintshire schools to have access to a selection of sanitary products in school or delivered directly and discreetly to their homes and supports their engagement in learning.</p> <p>The grant also enables period products to be distributed through each of the nine foodbanks in Flintshire. Youth groups / projects are also provided with a selection of sanitary products. Through the Council's resettlement coordinator, the grant was also able to support the refugees from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria now based in Flintshire.</p>
1.14	<p>Children will not concentrate and learn if they are hungry. Persistent hunger has a negative impact on brain development which has long term consequences for educational achievement.</p> <p>As part of the Co-operation Agreement with Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Government is working closely with local authorities to meet the commitment for every primary school pupil to receive a free school meal by 2024. £225m has been committed to secure delivery of this over the next three years and the universal free school meals roll-out commenced in September 2022. Flintshire has met the Welsh Government's timetable for a phased introduction to all primary school pupils by 2024 with Reception pupils in September 2022 and Years 1 and 2 from April 2023. Work is continuing plans to ensure the continued roll out for years 3 to 6 is completed by the summer of 2024.</p> <p>Provision of free primary breakfast clubs and the Year 7 free breakfast scheme also provide opportunities for schools to mitigate against child poverty.</p>
1.15	<p>It is hoped that this report provides members with useful information about the impact of poverty on educational achievement, sets that within the wider context of the local and national approaches to addressing poverty and the work of the Education Portfolio to help schools support their disadvantaged learners more effectively.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>The WG Pupil Development Grant is currently distributed to schools via the regional consortia and is based on school's FSM levels. Support for schools ensure effective use of the PDG comes through the interaction between schools and their individual Supporting Improvement Provider, through professional learning events and via the national learning platform Hwb. There are no financial implications arising from this report.</p>

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>There are no specific risks arising from this report and subsequent actions.</p>

	<p>The Council undertook a review of its Well-being Objectives during the development of the Council Plan. This includes a theme of poverty which is woven through individual portfolios to ensure a cross-council approach.</p> <p>The Council's Education Portfolio has a detailed risk assessment which outlines key risks related to the delivery of education services and method statements which describe how these risks are managed. These are regularly reported to the Education, Youth and Culture Overview Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>GwE maintains its own risk register to identify and manage risks on a local, regional and national level which is regularly updated and reported upon to the Management Board and the Joint Committee.</p>
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4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	<p>Regular discussions are held between Education Officers and the Flintshire Headteacher Federations to ensure that tackling the impact of poverty remains a key focus for the Portfolio. This information is used to inform the Portfolio's ongoing cycle of self-evaluation and improvement.</p> <p>Information is also provided to the GwE Management Board which comprises of the Senior Management Team of GwE and the six Chief Education Officers of the North Wales authorities.</p> <p>GwE use a range of models and surveys to consider impact, based on national and international research, as well as working collaboratively with strategic Higher Education Institutes (HEI).</p>

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	There are no appendices to this report.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>Wales' Child Poverty Strategy; Progress Report 2022 https://www.gov.wales/child-poverty-strategy-2022-progress-report-html</p> <p>Inequalities in GCSE results across England and Wales September 2022 https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/inequalities-in-gcse-results-across-england-and-wales/</p> <p>Estyn Annual Report 2021 -2022 https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual_report/tackling-the-impact-of-poverty-and-disadvantage/</p> <p>Flintshire Inspection report 2019 https://www.estyn.gov.wales/provider/6649999</p>

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Vicky Barlow, Senior Manager for School Improvement Telephone: 01352 704054 Cymraeg/ Welsh 01267 224923 E-mail: vicky.barlow@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Disadvantaged – Pupils are classed as disadvantage if they were eligible for free school meals in the past six years</p> <p>Persistently disadvantaged- Pupils considered persistently disadvantaged if they were eligible for free school meals for 80 per cent of their time in education.</p> <p>Pupil Development Grant (PDG)and Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG) – grant funding for schools and local authorities to improve outcomes for learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM), eligible learners in Early Years settings where Foundation Phase is delivered and children who are looked after by the local authority.</p> <p>School Essential Grant - help with uniform and school equipment costs for children whose families are on lower incomes and qualify for certain benefits. See www.gov.wales for further information.</p> <p>Council Plan: the document which sets out the annual priorities of the Council. It is a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 for organisations to ‘set out any actions to increase the extent to which the council is meeting the performance requirements.’ Plans for organisations should be robust; be clear on where it wants to go; and how it will get there.</p>