

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday, 17 th December 2020
Report Subject	Blended Learning
Cabinet Member	Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education
Report Author	Chief Officer (Education & Youth)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the introduction of a blended learning approach in Flintshire schools. A blended learning approach combines traditional classroom practice with online learning activities. It can comprise a variety of methods including face-to-face tuition, activities delivered online and ‘flipped’ learning.

In a blended learning approach, time at school is used to support the activities that learners can complete at home at their own pace. These include guided investigations and extended opportunities to apply new skills, knowledge and concepts. In a ‘flipped’ learning approach, planning includes opportunities for learners to research, prepare and consider before using contact time with teachers in school to explore and consolidate.

Since schools have reopened for the delivery of education, GwE has provided quality professional development and a range of useful resources for all schools in order to facilitate continuity in pupils’ education both at school and at home through a blended learning approach.

Since March 2020, blended learning has been introduced and used effectively in all schools in Flintshire. Schools have developed a shared understanding of blended learning, working both independently and collaboratively to provide a widening range of engaging learning activities for pupils of all abilities.

Blended learning has placed significant demands on schools’ supply of digital devices and on the IT infrastructure. However, the effective work undertaken by schools to identify and support learners who may be ‘digitally disadvantaged’ by loaning devices combined with the investment programme from Welsh Government in devices and the school IT networks has helped to mitigate this risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	The committee acknowledges the strong partnership working between Flintshire Schools and GwE which has established successful approaches to blended learning for the benefit of learners during the pandemic.
2	The committee is assured of the quality of blended learning in Flintshire schools to date and notes the positive impact on the professional development of the schools' workforce to meet this new approach to teaching and learning.
3	The committee welcomes the significant investment by Welsh Government in schools' digital infrastructure but acknowledges this is an area of ever increasing demand to ensure the effective delivery of blended learning moving forward.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING 'BLENDED LEARNING'
1.01	The development of a blended learning approach has arisen specifically as a response to the coronavirus pandemic. Positive cases of Covid-19 in schools result in learners having to remain at home in self-isolation for extended periods of time and schools have had to adapt their pedagogy very quickly to provide continuity in their educational offer. Maintaining the pace of learning and the quality of learning experiences are essential to ensure learners continue to progress and are not disadvantaged by the disruption caused by pandemic.
1.02	Blended learning combines traditional classroom practice with online learning activities. As a result of the pandemic, schools now have to be able to combine these approaches into a seamless curriculum offer for learners. This has required a shift in teaching styles and strategies for staff and different ways of learning for pupils. Everyone has had to rapidly learn new skills, particularly digital skills, and master a variety of online tools.
1.03	The Regional School improvement Service, GwE, quickly responded to these changes brought about by the pandemic and developed a range of resources and professional learning opportunities for staff in schools. This support package was developed across the whole North Wales region and has provided a consistent framework within which schools have developed their practice in blended learning. It has supported widespread collaboration and reduced workload.
1.04	Since March 2020 and the onset of the pandemic, all schools in Flintshire have embraced this new way of working and the report at Appendix 1 provides a detailed overview of how blended learning approaches have successfully evolved and the range of provision offered to Flintshire learners to maintain their engagement and continue to make progress.

1.05	Blended learning has highlighted the challenge in ensuring all learners have access to digital devices and reliable broadband. As previously reported to the committee, the Council and schools disseminated a huge number of devices to learners who were identified as 'digitally disadvantaged' during the period of school closure. The return to full time school provision since September but with the impact of some cohorts being placed into isolation and needing to access online learning, whilst other pupils remain in school and also need access to IT equipment, has highlighted that more investment is needed in digital equipment across the schools' network. Welsh Government is providing significant long term investment via its national Hwb programme but this comes in phases and the next 'wave' of hardware will not be available until next year. The demand across the UK for digital devices is unprecedented.
1.06	Blended learning also places huge demands on the Council's IT infrastructure which can sometimes result in slower broadband speeds and poor connectivity which disrupts online learning. Again, the significant investment of over £50m by Welsh Government in schools' infrastructure is helping to rectify this issue. The upgrades to the schools' networks continue at a rapid pace, despite Covid restrictions, and remains on target for completion by early April 2021. The committee will receive a more detailed report about the Hwb programme and the digital developments in schools in the new year.
1.06	Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, Estyn, has been commissioned by Welsh Government to undertake a thematic review of the response of schools and local education authorities to supporting learning during the pandemic. Headteachers, Education Portfolio officers and GwE officers have all been interviewed as part of this process which had a significant focus on blended learning. Each local authority will receive a formal feedback letter which will be shared with the committee in due course and Estyn will publish a national report in the new year.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	Schools are benefitting from the Welsh Government investment via the Hwb programme but have to commit to maintaining this improved infrastructure beyond the lifetime of WG grant. In order to ensure the digital standards demanded by WG are sustained, schools have committed to setting aside funding within their budgets over the next five financial years to create a funding pot to replace obsolete devices. With the current level of school funding in Flintshire, low school balances and a number of schools in a deficit position, particularly in the secondary sector, this is a financial challenge.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	The Education Portfolio has a detailed risk assessment which outlines key risks related to the continued disruption of teaching and learning as a result of the ongoing pandemic and method statements which describe how these risks are managed. These are regularly reported to the committee.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	None

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – GwE Report on Blended Learning in Flintshire

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	An overview of the Hwb Digital Programme for Wales https://hwb.gov.wales/overview-of-hwb

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Jane Borthwick Telephone: 01352 704019 E-mail: Jane.E.Borthwick@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>HWB – An all Wales digital learning platform</p> <p>GwE – The regional school improvement service</p> <p>Bubbles - groups of pupils and staff that remain constant to eliminate transmission risk</p> <p>IT - Information technology</p> <p>Asynchronous - At the same time as other types of learning</p> <p>Virtual resources - Resources available in digital platforms</p> <p>Webinars - online training sessions</p>