

**COUNCIL: 28 JANUARY 2021**

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## **EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT & SKILLS STATEMENT**

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### **COVID-19 Position in Schools**

With an increasing number of positive cases in schools prior to Christmas leading to large numbers of staff and pupils having to self-isolate, in response, Cardiff Council made the decision, on the back of Welsh Government guidance, to close secondary schools for face-to-face learning on 11 December 2020. Primary schools also moved to a distance learning approach from 16 December 2020. In the weeks leading up to this point, the city's schools had experienced over 35% of all positive cases since September 2020 and many schools were in the position where the sustainability of staffing resources was becoming increasingly difficult.

This allowed for greater consistency of access to distance learning; reduced the impact of a positive case on large numbers of contacts; reduced the reporting and tracing implications, thereby allowing greater capacity in the Test, Trace, Protect process to manage the rising numbers of cases in the community; and ensured schools would not need to deal with positive cases throughout the Christmas period.

At that time, the Council also outlined its planned approach to a return to face-to-face learning in the New Year, with all schools continuing to provide distance learning in the first week of the Spring Term, whilst providing face-to-face support for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers. The expectation then was that there would be a phased return of pupils to schools prior to a full return from 18 January 2021. This was superseded subsequently by the Welsh Government's announcement of a further national lockdown period in Wales, including the closure of all schools up to February Half Term if case numbers are not reduced.

Cardiff schools were well positioned to implement Welsh Government expectations, which focus on consistent distance learning for all pupils. With due regard to Welsh Government designations, schools identified the most vulnerable pupils for in-school support, as well as prioritising the children of key workers in the NHS, blue light services, education and social care. Capacity is determined at a local level with a critical focus on providing quality distance learning to all. In consultation with key stakeholders, the Council has produced guidance for schools on operations throughout this period and will continue to update this guidance in line with Welsh Government expectations and scientific updates.

## **Digital Deprivation**

Ensuring that all children and young people are presented with the same opportunities to engage with remote learning whilst schools are closed has been a priority and the Council continues its work to address the issue of digital deprivation. To date, 16,975 new digital devices and 2,491 new 4G broadband devices have been provided to schools since the start of the pandemic and a further 855 devices are due to be distributed next week. Our dedicated project team continues to work with schools to identify those pupils who are digitally disadvantaged.

The rollout of devices is ongoing, including support to access Wi-Fi, as part of Cardiff's long term strategy to provide every child with the appropriate connectivity, both during and after lockdown. If a child does not yet have access to a suitable ICT device or internet access at home, they should inform their school so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

## **Estyn**

In the Autumn Term last year, the Welsh Government commissioned Estyn to undertake a national thematic review of local authorities' work in supporting their learning communities in schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) during the period from March to October 2020. A copy of the subsequent update report for the period from June to November 2020 has been published this month by Estyn at: [https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-01/LA%20consortia%20support%20for%20schools%20and%20PRUs%20en\\_3.pdf](https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-01/LA%20consortia%20support%20for%20schools%20and%20PRUs%20en_3.pdf)

Estyn has also written separately to the Council to provide feedback on its specific findings in Cardiff. The Cardiff report is based on meetings that were held remotely with me, council officers and a sample of schools and PRUs. Estyn also considered supporting documentation provided by the Council and feedback from surveys of school/PRU leaders, governors, teachers & support staff, parents and pupils.

The report recognises the good work of the Education & Lifelong Learning directorate throughout the Covid-19 pandemic from the initial lockdown in March 2020 to date, with best practice highlighted throughout the report. A key feature of the report is the excellent support provided to schools by officers in the directorate, as well as the proactive approaches to supporting learning, digital deprivation and vulnerable pupils in the city.

## **Qualifications Assessment Arrangements in Wales 2021**

On 16 December 2020, the Welsh Government Minister for Education issued a [Written Statement](#), which provided further clarity on the system to replace exams for general qualifications in 2021. This confirmed the intention for general qualifications in Wales to be supported by a three pillar approach made up of:

- non-examination assessments;
- internal assessments; and
- assessments that are externally set and marked.

Following the First Minister's announcement on 8 January 2021 that most pupils will continue to learn remotely until at least 29 January 2021 or possibly until February Half Term, Qualifications Wales announced that the planned spring internal assessment window for GCSE, AS, and A levels, between 22 February and 23 April 2021 will not now take place and revised arrangements will be made. In addition, Qualifications Wales confirmed that the January 2021 exams for Wales-only vocational qualifications will continue as planned. If learners are unable to sit their exams in January 2021, they will have the opportunity to complete their assessments in the summer.

On 20 January 2021, the Minister for Education issued a subsequent [Written Statement](#) confirming further changes to qualifications following the disruption to learning and the move to a Centre-Determined Grade model, meaning that learners in Wales studying for Qualifications Wales approved GCSE, AS and A levels this year will receive grades determined by their school or college, based on work they have completed over their course.

### **Child Friendly City**

In this the fourth year of the Council's engagement with the UNICEF UK Child Friendly programme, we will be working towards formal recognition of Cardiff as a Child Friendly City. Our ambitions to make rights a reality for all children and young people are set out in our Child Friendly Cardiff Strategy, which was launched in 2018.

In Spring 2020, UNICEF UK provided a progress report, which highlighted that the Council has played a pioneering role in establishing the Child Friendly City programme within the UK and that significant progress has been made in establishing, prioritising and implementing a child rights-based approach in the Council's culture and commitments.

We will continue to build upon our progress to date, both within the Council and with partners in the city, in particular, to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard and listened to as we develop our Covid-19 recovery plans. We cannot allow children's and young people's lives to be derailed by Covid-19 and this will be a key focus of the Child Friendly programme in Cardiff in the months ahead.

### **Free School Meals**

Since the start of the Spring Term this month, schools have been in lockdown and all pupils eligible for Free School Meals have received a supermarket voucher. They will continue to receive a voucher on a fortnightly basis until schools restart. At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, there were 11,500 pupils eligible for Free School Meals there are now in excess of 14,000.

### **Additional Learning Needs (ALN)**

Special schools, resource bases and the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) remain open to their most vulnerable learners and are providing distance learning for pupils who are learning at home. The Council worked with schools last summer to develop guidance on Continuity of Learning for learners with ALN. The document is available through

the Welsh Government's Hwb platform and provides advice on how to adapt online learning and support. Specialist services continue to work with schools to support learners with ALN attending the Hubs or learning at home.

The Welsh Government has announced that staff in schools providing intimate care to children with complex medical needs should be prioritised for Covid-19 vaccination. The Inclusion Service is working with the Covid-19 Vaccination Team to identify and provide contact details of relevant staff, who will be notified directly.

### **Period Dignity**

Funded by Welsh Government, almost 15,000 packs of eco-friendly period products have been delivered to Cardiff schools, including to Secondary schools prior to the Christmas break, which allowed those pupils who needed them access to free period products during the school holidays. They have also been distributed this month to Primary and Special schools.

### **School Admissions**

Primary school applications closed on 11 January 2021 with 3,301 being submitted on time, which is 81.1% of the transfer group (a slight increase on the 78.9% last year). There were 680 first preference applications for Welsh Medium (20.6%) a small increase on the previous year (20.1%). Offers will be issued to parents on 16 April 2021.

Secondary school applications closed on 18 November 2020, with 3,856 applications being submitted on time, which is 91.5 % of the transfer group (a marked increase from the 88.1% who applied on time last year). The admissions marketing and communications campaign launched in September 2020, and the new engagement practices, have made a notable impact on applications submitted on time, as you can see from the 3.4% increase. This campaign will continue with another 3 languages being added to the 9 we currently promote next year. Secondary Offers will be issued to parents on 1 March 2021.

Nursery school applications for those born between 1 September 2017 and 31 August 2018 opened on Monday 18 January 2021.

### **School Organisation Programme**

Last month, the Cabinet considered and approved two School Organisation Programme proposals for Cathays High School and Ysgol Mynydd Bychan. Consultations for both proposals are due to commence next month.

Cathays High School will proceed to consultation on proposals to increase the school from 5.5FE to 8FE (including 250 post 16 places) and expand the Specialist Resource Base for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder to 50 places on the Maindy Centre site. The development will upgrade community facilities, provide open access community space and relocate the Maindy cycle track to the International Sports Village.

The Ysgol Mynydd Bychan proposal will look to increase capacity of the school by 0.5FE and consolidate the size of Allensbank Primary School at 1FE in September 2022. The Council will also expand the Ysgol Mynydd Bychan in September 2021 in the Allensbank Primary School buildings should it be needed.

The Council is also soon to enter into the main building contract for Fitzalan High School, which will allow works on site to seamlessly follow the enabling works. The school will be ready for occupation in the 2022/23 academic year.

**Councillor Sarah Merry**  
**Cabinet Member for Education, Employment & Skills**  
**21 January 2021**