

North Lanarkshire Council Report

Audit and Scrutiny Panel

approval noting

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Audit Scotland report: Improving outcomes for young people through school education

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is inform members of the Panel of the Audit Scotland report '*Improving outcomes for young people through school education*' published in March 2021, to provide an overview of issues and recommendations raised in the report and how these issues and recommendations are being addressed by management.

The Audit Scotland report looks at how effectively the Scottish Government, councils and their partners were improving outcomes for young people through school education.

Audit Scotland noted that the poverty-related attainment gap remains wide and inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19 and concluded that progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the Scottish Government's aims and that improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country

The report recognises the need for the Scottish Government, councils and Education Scotland to work together to take forward the recommendations, where appropriate, within the context of a what they describe as a 'collaborative system' The Audit Scotland report contains a range of recommendations directed at all stakeholders.

The management response to the issues raised is intended to provide the Panel with the opportunity to gain assurance that the Council is taking reasonable steps to ensure that the Council's arrangements are effective in managing the risks identified by Audit Scotland.

Recommendations

The Panel is invited to:

- 1) note the key findings of the Audit Scotland report and the management response, including suggested action, to the issues and recommendations raised in the report; and
- 2) consider whether a further report should be required to be submitted to a future meeting in order to obtain additional assurance that any actions arising from the matters raised by the Audit Scotland have been, or will be, appropriately progressed by management.

The Plan for North Lanarkshire

Priority Support all children and young people to realise their full potential

Ambition statement (6) Raise attainment and skills for learning, life, and work to enhance opportunities and choices

1. Background

- 1.1 School education is fundamental to ensuring positive long-term outcomes for young people and it impacts on Scotland's economy and society. It performs a key role in contributing to the 11 long-term outcomes set out in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework (NPF). The Scottish Government is responsible for developing national policy and strategic direction. Its vision for education in Scotland is to deliver excellence through raising attainment: ensuring that every child achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to shape their future as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors. It also aims to achieve equity: ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap.
- 1.2 The Council also has significant ambitions in this field. One of the priorities included in The Plan for North Lanarkshire is to 'Support all children and young people to realise their full potential' with an associated ambition to raise attainment and skills for learning, life, and work to enhance opportunities and choices. This is delivered by a range of actions, activities including Programme of Work items P034.1 Improving outcomes and P039 Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and Pupil Equity Fund (PEF).
- 1.3 In 2019, Audit Scotland carried out audit work to look at how effectively the Scottish Government, councils and their partners were improving outcomes for young people through school education. This work was paused in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was restarted in October 2020 to look at the impact of Covid-19 on school education and the response taken by the Scottish Government, councils and their partners. The Audit Scotland report draws together the key findings from these two pieces of work. The report recognises that this is a fast-changing situation and only covers actions taken by the Scottish Government, councils and their partners up until early January 2021. The audit considered mainstream primary and secondary school education.

2. Report

Audit Scotland report – key findings

- 2.1 The Audit Scotland report contains the following key messages:
 - School education is not just about exam results. It also aims to improve children's and young people's health and wellbeing and support wider outcomes such as vocational qualifications. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected children and young people in many ways, including their learning, wellbeing and economic circumstances. Pupils living in the most challenging circumstances have been most affected by school closures.
 - Those involved in planning, delivering and supporting school education were working well together prior to the pandemic. This strong foundation helped them to collaborate to deliver a rapid response to Covid-19 in exceptionally challenging circumstances. The pandemic has reinforced the importance of school education and other sectors working together to tackle issues which affect young people's life chances and outcomes, such as child poverty and health and wellbeing.
 - Both national education policy and the curriculum reflect the importance for pupils of different pathways and opportunities, and outcomes beyond exam results. There has been an increase in the types of opportunities, awards and qualifications available to children and young people and an increase in the number awarded. However, better data is needed to understand if other outcomes, like wellbeing and confidence, are improving.

- There is wide variation in education performance across councils, with evidence of worsening performance on some indicators in some councils. At the national level, exam performance and other attainment measures have improved. But the rate of improvement up until 2018–19 has been inconsistent across different measures. Measuring progress has been hampered by the cancellation of exams and other data gaps caused by Covid-19. This could create risks around accountability.
- The poverty-related attainment gap remains wide and inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19. Progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the Scottish Government's aims. Improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country. The government and councils recognise that addressing inequalities must be at the heart of the response to Covid-19, longer-term recovery and improving education.
- Council spending on primary and secondary school education across Scotland increased by 5.1 per cent in real terms between 2013/14 and 2018/19, from £4.1 billion to £4.3 billion. Most of the real-terms increase in spend can be attributed to the Attainment Scotland Fund, which the Scottish Government set up in 2015/16 to close the poverty-related attainment gap. When this is excluded, real-terms spending increased by 0.7 per cent during the period, to just over £4.1 billion. The Scottish Government had put over £200 million of extra money into Covid-19 mitigation measures and education recovery by early January 2021.

Audit Scotland recommendations

- 2.3 In respect of recommendations made by Audit Scotland, the report recognises the need for the Scottish Government, councils and Education Scotland to work together to take forward the recommendations, where appropriate, within the context of a what they describe as a 'collaborative system' and with lead responsibility as set out below.
- 2.4 The report recommends that the Scottish Government should:
- continue to lead the development of priorities for education recovery and improvement, building on the actions set out in the National Improvement Framework (NIF) for 2021, the Equity Audit and the forthcoming OECD review, being clear about anticipated outcomes and milestones;
 - work with stakeholders to develop and publish consistent and robust national data that reflects the ambitions of the national curriculum, national policy priorities such as health and wellbeing and confidence, and key priorities for Covid-19 recovery and improvement;
 - update the NIF to reflect data on these agreed outcomes and consider how to ensure that there is greater prominence on these broader outcome measures in public reporting and messaging, for example by inclusion in the NIF key indicators;
 - work with stakeholders to agree an approach to dealing with the challenges created by data disruption in 2020 and 2021 which will affect monitoring of progress in achieving policy ambitions relating to outcomes and the attainment gap; and
 - ensure that future methods for targeting support to address inequalities reflect broader demographic issues, which are not well reflected in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), and updated data on the economic impact of Covid-19 on communities.

2.5 Recommendations directed at Education Scotland are that they should work with schools, councils and RICs to:

- understand the factors that cause variation in performance across schools and councils;
- achieve greater consistency in applying the NIF drivers through a targeted response that reflects local priorities for improvement, with a focus on reducing inequalities; and
- ensure the successful innovation and learning from the Covid-19 response, such as the opportunities from using digital learning, informs future planning for improved outcomes for children and young people.

2.6 Audit Scotland recommendations directed at local authorities are that Councils should:

- work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners, for example in the third sector, to reduce variability in outcomes by more consistent application of the drivers of improvement set out in the NIF, by:
 - using data to understand trends in outcome measures over time and across different demographic groups;
 - using evidence-based quality-improvement approaches;
 - sharing learning and applying good practice across schools and councils; and
 - helping schools to build up their data analytical, evaluation and quality-improvement skills so they can make evidence-based decisions.
- monitor the short- and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 (including the impact of remote learning) on local children's and young people's learning and wellbeing and act when required to mitigate the effects and improve outcomes;
- more effectively and consistently involve young people and parents in planning to improve outcomes and to inform the local response to Covid-19; and
- ensure third-sector organisations working with or representing children and young people are effectively involved in local planning to improve longer-term outcomes, and to deliver the local education response to Covid-19.

2.7 And jointly the report recommends that the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and councils should:

- continue to ensure a coordinated policy response within and across government (for example with health and children and families services) when planning to improve longer-term outcomes for children and young people and delivering the education recovery response to the equality impacts of Covid-19;
- use the Equity Audit and other evidence to monitor the short- and longer-term impact of Covid-19 on children's and young people's learning and wellbeing, and to inform the development of local and national priorities and targeting of mitigating actions; and
- further promote the importance of the different pathways, qualifications and awards available to young people with parents, carers, politicians, and the media, to support wider public understanding of the importance of broader outcomes.

- 2.8 Management responses to the recommendations targeted specifically at Councils as at paragraph 2.6 is at Appendix 1.
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3. Management commentary

- 3.1 North Lanarkshire Council's position in relation to the key issues highlighted by Audit Scotland are set out in the paragraphs below which have been provided by relevant senior management within Education and Families.
- 3.2 There is a separate report to the Education and Families Committee on the Interim SAC report which highlights several key interventions. It should be noted that last year's SAC plan was amended to reflect the emerging priorities in the COVID pandemic response and recovery.
- 3.3 The following sections highlight the thinking that will underpin planning for the next phase of COVID response and recovery. The material contained covers similar issues to those which made up the North Lanarkshire Council submission to the Education and Skills Committee of the Scottish Parliament in March 2021.

Helping pupils "catch up" following the impact of the pandemic on school education.

- 3.4 A range of interventions are being planned around a number of key initiatives, some of which are funded through the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the Pupil equity Fund. The Service intends to build up recovery activity around 'catch-up' around those existing interventions, which have a secure evidence-base driving them and are underpinned by research. They include the Digital School, the Virtual School, Cluster based teams, Literacy and Numeracy hubs, the Pedagogy team and the multi-agency COVID Tactical Response team. Further investment in these teams will enable a coordinated offering to be sustained through the next phases of COVID, making up a comprehensive set of contingencies.
- 3.5 The transition years to P1 and S1 were highlighted by head teachers as particularly challenging in session 2020–2021 so the Service is reviewing activity in supporting transitions and will be updating guidance. The issues were more related to emotional readiness around transition, rather than a requirement to catch up. This will be a key area of focus in the forthcoming COVID phases. Initially the emphasis will be on re-engaging learners and their families and supporting them through this transition period.
- 3.6 There is also a plan to allocate additional resources to clusters of primary schools to focus in on enhanced transition and catch up activities. The intention is to allocate additional funds becoming available through Scottish Government funding to do this. This will create opportunities to recruit teachers to support emerging priorities, securing an important pathway for them, whilst addressing immediate pressures.
- 3.7 Through this approach there will be strategic use of additional staffing, at locality, cluster and school level, to deliver bespoke in school and digital support for young people, on key areas such as Literacy, Numeracy and Health and Wellbeing (HWB), to support smooth transitions in learning for young people.
- 3.8 Supplementary guidance/awareness raising sessions are also being provided for parents/carers providing advice and guidance on how they can continue to support learning at home. Taking this holistic approach to family support and supporting the family group decision making process is central to the overall approach.
- 3.9 Schools and clusters have begun transition planning and have used digital approaches to support inclusion and familiarisation of the new environment. This has also included support and consultation with the wider family. This will focus on priority transition groups, such as the next P1 and S1 groups.

- 3.10 For the next phase of recovery, establishments will be required to create an interim curriculum rationale focusing on core subjects and big block/interdisciplinary learning. This will provide learners with increased opportunities to develop key knowledge and skills and to apply learning in different contexts, ensuring depth and breadth.
- 3.11 Some secondary schools are providing in-school Easter School and/or Saturday classes for senior phase pupils. This will be supported by a central offering, facilitated through the Digital School, which is offering an *On-line Easter School* for senior phase pupils, focusing on key subject skills.
- 3.12 School leaders planning strategic and diagnostic use of SNSA to assess current learning, knowledge and skills of children and young people. This will then inform the planned learning in term 4 and beyond, helping to identify key areas of skills development for pupils.

Building on Lessons Learned from the Blended Learning Model

- 3.13 In the remote learning phases (January–March 2021) each school had established detailed plans for the remote and digital learning. These were quality assured by the central education management team. In subsequent blended learning phase (February – March 2021) each secondary school developed a plan which was signed off by Heads of Service. Critical to all these plans was the maintenance of a high-quality delivery of remote and on-line learning.
- 3.14 The approach to the Digital School (and the virtual classroom particularly) featured in the Service's engagement with HMIE on 15 February where the local authority was challenged on its quality assurance of digital learning. A separate [report](#) on this gives further detail.
- 3.15 For assurance, it is worth noting that the Virtual Classroom has now had almost 600,000 visits to it since 11 January. It averages around 50,000 visits per week and is a tool used by teachers to support blended models of learning.
- 3.16 The virtual classroom focused on key curricular areas of literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing and the interdisciplinary approach was through STEM. All learning was planned from Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes. This universal approach will continue as part of the blended learning in Term 4 and beyond.
- 3.17 There are high levels of endorsement for the Council's e-learning approach by both staff, pupils and parents across a range of stakeholder engagement surveys. Using feedback from stakeholders, establishments have created bespoke blended learning models, offering a combination of digital and remote learning experiences. Staff have reflected on curriculum design principles to ensure learners were challenged and that learning was relevant and progressive. Opportunities for personalisation and choice were included to enable families to tailor approaches to meet their individual circumstances. This approach will be continued in the next phases of COVID response and recovery.
- 3.18 Interdisciplinary learning was used extensively to provide learners with the opportunity to apply skills and knowledge in different contexts. Staff made strategic use of a range of National and Local resources, with clear guidance provided at local level, to ensure all learning experiences were differentiated and contributed to practitioners' long and short-term plans for pupils.
- 3.19 Local Authority and establishment quality assurance processes supported professional dialogue and continuous improvement.
- 3.20 Within (some of) the ASN establishments, strategic use of bespoke outdoor learning experiences enabled a higher number of pupils to be supported during the pandemic.

- 3.21 CLPL sessions continue to be offered to ensure staff are confident in providing high quality blended learning opportunities including use of Teams, Onenote, Learning, teaching and assessment courses and STEM webinars. Schools have made increased use of Microsoft Forms and OneNote to assess learning remotely and provide feedback. Planned use of Sumdog, IDL and other programmes which support progressive learning and assessment have supported continued use of assessment through remote learning.
- 3.22 The Digital School's Easter School offering is targeted to support senior phase pupils. The virtual classroom will continue a universal remote learning offering for all young people in the BGE on an on-going basis, with a particular focus on ASN and Gaelic.

Immediate Priorities as Pupils Return to In-school Learning

- 3.23 The initial priorities on returning pupils to school involve securing key learning and assessment opportunities for senior phase pupils to manage the significant risks that surround SQA alternative certification processes. There will also be a more general focus on quantifying learning loss. Lastly, there is a structured population wide exercise underway to get a fix on issues relating to young people's wellbeing generally.
- 3.24 The initial focus for the senior phase is on establishing the basis for working grades, as per the specific arrangements in the Alternative Certification Model for SQA awards and qualifications in 2021. It is likely that this process will generate considerable workload for school and local authority staff. Feedback from the Pupil Stakeholder Forum revealed considerable anxieties which will need to be handled with sensitivity. The potential for challenges from pupils and parents who are unhappy with grades awarded are considerable and this will require to be managed.
- 3.25 A range of assessments techniques will be used appropriately to identify learners' strengths and areas for development to enable staff to plan effectively to differentiate learning and meet learners needs. This will also allow staff to build on learners' new skills and experiences, particularly around areas of digital literacy.
- 3.26 Guidance issued to primary schools in August and March for the return to in-school learning for P1-3 and then P4-7 in literacy and numeracy to support progression and assessment of learning. Templates for active literacy and numeracy approaches have been provided for schools which exemplify evidence-based approaches.
- 3.27 SNSA used as a diagnostic assessment tool at key stages. A range of other data will be used to build a picture of learning loss (YARK, MALT, ACEL). Trends from assessment data will be collated at establishment, cluster and Authority level to identify trends and patterns. These trends and patterns will inform strategic resourcing and training plans for next session.

Assess the Impacts of the Pandemic on Learning and Wellbeing

- 3.28 The Service are conducting a whole population survey of children's health and wellbeing, using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. 48,000 children will be involved in this. This will be cross-referenced with data from the 2016 Realigning Children's Services exercise, which used similar approaches and had data from approximately 10,000 children in it.
- 3.29 In the COVID-19 response phase the Service strengthened its cluster-based approaches to dealing with health and wellbeing. This involved a more localised and integrated approaches to planning for children's wellbeing, which has resulted in a systematic, structured approach to meeting the needs of vulnerable children.
- 3.30 Individual establishments will conduct a range of formative and summative assessments to identify a baseline for pupils and to plan for next steps in learning.

- 3.31 Schools leaders have continued with evaluation of Improvement Planning and SAC/PEF plans, these will also measure the impact on learning and teaching as well as wellbeing of staff and young people.
- 3.32 Cluster Wellbeing meetings held weekly focus on the needs of the child and the family. These have been instrumental in supporting bespoke learning packages for children and young people. The Virtual School has continued to support blending learning for Care Experienced children and young people.

Providing additional activities, learning opportunities or Wellbeing Support to Pupils

- 3.33 The Service has advanced plans for an enrichment afternoon as part of the 32 period secondary school week, which have been developed in line with the emerging national drive to provide an additional curriculum and support offering to young people in recompense for experiences they have missed out on due to the pandemic.
- 3.34 There is a planned expansion about to take place of several programmes relating to health and wellbeing which have been incubated in the SAC plan and which have proven successful.
- 3.35 The Service is currently in the process of integrating a new Wellbeing application across the Authority to help improve outcomes for children and families and strengthen current GIRFEC processes. This application aligns with the National Practice model, providing a secure recording system for establishments to record and store relevant information about a young person, integrating information to support planning decisions.
- 3.36 Health and Wellbeing Officers from the Authority's Scottish Attainment Team will continue to liaise with colleagues from within and out with the service, e.g. Psychological Services and Health Protection Scotland, to highlight relevant training and resources. Current HWB programmes will be extended to include new Senior Phase HWB resources linked to Healthy Schools programme. Any additional moneys from government for recovery will be used to support this and other priorities.

Next Steps

- 3.37 There is currently no certainty as to how national planning to tackle the poverty related attainment gap will be brought forward post the 2021 Scottish Parliament election. This means that the current programmes in the SAC plan are at risk beyond March 2022. Planning been done in-year for the Scottish Attainment Challenge is being managed with a view to potentially having to conclude this activity.
- 3.38 In the COVID-19 response phase the Service is strengthening several existing interventions which enact its strategic approach to improvement. Whilst some of these are partially or wholly funded through SAC, work is being done to evaluate how best to sustain these going forward. These include:
- The Statutory Leavers' Pathways Programme
 - The Virtual School for Care experienced Young People
 - The Digital School
 - The Cluster Based Improvement and Innovation Leads
 - The Pedagogy Team
 - The Literacy and Numeracy Hubs
- 3.39 There is an exercise being carried out on workforce planning for the next academic session on a planned approach to ensuring the Service maximises the available resource in the newly qualified teacher group (186) and the emerging probationer group (257).
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4. Public Sector Equality Duty and Fairer Scotland Duty

- 4.1 **Equality Impact Assessment** No impacts arising directly from this report
- 4.2 **Fairer Scotland** No impacts arising directly from this report
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5. Impact

- 5.1 **Financial impact:** None arising directly from this report
- 5.2 **HR policy / Legislative impact:** None arising directly from this report
- 5.3 **Technology / Digital impact:** None arising directly from this report
- 5.4 **Environmental impact:** None arising directly from this report
- 5.5 **Communications impact:** None arising directly from this report
- 5.6 **Risk impact:** Failure to address the issues arising from the Audit Scotland report could impact on the Council's ability to successfully deliver against its corporate priorities and ambitions.
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6. Measures of success

- 6.1 A range of relevant performance information in respect of attainment is reported annually by the Service in a Standards and Quality report which serves provide all stakeholders and the public with the performance information across the 6 NIF drivers and against improvement priorities to measure performance in improving educational outcomes for young people. This report enables the Council to meet the statutory requirement under the Standards in Schools etc. Act 2000 (as amended by the Education (Scotland) Act 2016) and provides the information required to contribute to the Scottish Government's annual report on the 6 NIF drivers for improvement.
- 6.2 In addition, the Service also publishes an annual progress report on its SAC and PEF plan designed to ensure an increased focus on research and evidence-based practice and a more explicit outcomes focus.
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7. Supporting documents

- Appendix 1 Audit Scotland's key recommendations for Councils (the full audit report can be found on the Audit Scotland website).



Ken Adamson
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Appendix 1 Audit Scotland recommendations and management responses

Audit Scotland have identified the following recommendations for councils:

1. **Work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners, for example in the third sector, to reduce variability in outcomes by more consistent application of the drivers of improvement set out in the NIF, by:**
 - a. **using data to understand trends in outcome measures over time and across different demographic groups;**
 - b. **using evidence-based quality-improvement approaches;**
 - c. **sharing learning and applying good practice across schools and councils; and**
 - d. **helping schools to build up their data analytical, evaluation and quality-improvement skills so they can make evidence-based decisions.**

Management response:

(a) Using data to understand trends in outcome measures over time and across different demographic groups

The service has recently developed an interactive dashboard for schools covering a range of indicators and integrating a number of data system feeds. The What's the Story System has been developed with head teachers and covers all aspects of attainment, considering local and national benchmarks.

The Service is currently conducting a population wide health and wellbeing survey of all pupils. This will be benchmarked against the similar survey undertaken through the Realigning Children's Services process in 2016 to identify trends and priorities. This is likely to be even more important in the COVID recovery phase.

(b) using evidence-based quality-improvement approaches;

There is a structured quality improvement approach in place which has a range of aspects, ranging from challenge and support visits for schools to transparent sharing of data through to the Investors in People Process. These processes are led by Education Managers and Heads of Service and apply to all 119 of our schools and all 25 of our current and future family learning centres. Information on performance in these areas is included in regular Standards and Quality Reports to the Education and Families Committee.

(c) and (d) sharing learning and applying good practice across schools and councils; and helping schools to build up their data analytical, evaluation and quality-improvement skills so they can make evidence-based decisions.

The recent establishment of the Improvement Hub allows the sharing of local, national and international experiences in sharing improvement practice. It is used by schools to underpin PEF spend and the basis for the peer review processes which underpin the Family Improvement Groups of Schools.

Appendix 1 Audit Scotland recommendations and management responses

Audit Scotland have identified the following recommendations for councils:

2. Monitor the short- and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 (including the impact of remote learning) on local children's and young people's learning and wellbeing and act when required to mitigate the effects and improve outcomes.

Management response:

This is an area which has received considerable critical attention from the service and several points are worth highlighting:

- The SAC research and evaluation tools YARC and MALT are used to measure a range of short and medium-term interventions, locked into the service's approach to improving literacy and numeracy
- The progression in learning in the digital environment is structured into the planning within the Digital School/Virtual Classroom, which incorporates elements which ensure progression in learning (use of national curricular benchmarks to inform planning)

The population wide wellbeing survey, the ACEL (teacher judgement) data collection and the SNSA will be used to provide a rounded picture of learning loss and to inform planning for the next phase.

3. More effectively and consistently involve young people and parents in planning to improve outcomes and to inform the local response to Covid-19; and

Management response:

The recent population survey of health and wellbeing is an important vehicle to allow children to report on their needs.

There has been an extensive programme of stakeholder engagement in relation to digital and remote learning, with the most recent surveys of pupils and parents in January having over 7500 respondees, declaring a generally high level of satisfaction (all of which was reported to the Education and Families Committee in February).

There are now well-established stakeholder forums for pupils and parents (both mainstream schools and ASN schools) which have been very helpful to officers in terms of sharing information and taking soundings about future planning.

4. Ensure third-sector organisations working with or representing children and young people are effectively involved in local planning to improve longer-term outcomes, and to deliver the local education response to Covid-19.

Management response:

The cluster-based planning process for Cluster Improvement Plans is critical to the success of local partnership and incorporates the views of key partners.

This is specifically also the case when it comes to planning for children's wellbeing processes which have been recently redesigned by key colleagues in Social Work and Education, and for the specific plans put in place for individual children / young people.

There are regular engagement sessions with the PVI sector for early years.