



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

**A report on the quality of local authority
education services
for children and young people**

in

**Powys County Council
County Hall
Llandrindod Wells
LD1 5LG**

February/March 2011

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on their capacity to improve.

In these evaluations, we use a four-point scale:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Unsatisfactory

The report was produced in accordance with section 38 of the Education Act 1997, the Children Act 2004 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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Context

Powys County Council is the unitary authority for Powys and covers a quarter of the area of Wales. It is one of the largest yet least populated counties in England and Wales. Located in central Wales along the Borders area with England, it borders 13 other authorities. Powys covers 5,197 square kilometres. Its population of approximately 132,000 is just 4.4% of the Welsh total.

Powys is a predominantly rural county with some small and medium-sized towns, but no large settlements or cities. There is only one town with over 10,000; there are 15 other main settlements and hundreds of small villages and hamlets.

Powys has a low proportion of young adults and a high proportion of older working and retired adults compared with the UK as a whole. The average age of the population in 2002 was 43 years, which compared with 40 in Wales and 39 in England and Wales.

The 2001 Census shows that 25,516 people, which is 21.1% of the county's population over three years old, can speak, read and write Welsh and that 38.1% of the 3-15 age group are Welsh speakers. In Powys, Welsh speakers are not evenly distributed within the various communities. There is a bigger density in the north than in the east.

The total workforce in the county numbers approximately 73,000. The county's main primary industries are agriculture and forestry, which employ 11% of the workforce. The public sector is the only large employer with 26% of the workforce employed mainly in local government, schools and health services. The last ten years have seen the disappearance of most large manufacturing employers.

There are 117 schools in Powys: 101 primary schools, 13 secondary and three special schools. Of the 101 primary schools, 53 (52%) meet the Welsh Government (WG) definition of a small school (fewer than 90 pupils). Within this structure a number of mainstream schools have specialist provision to cater for a wide range of additional needs. Many schools provide a focus for community activities and share provision such as halls and some sports facilities.

The proportion of pupils in compulsory education entitled to free school meals is 12%, which compares with 18.9% nationally.

The Welsh Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per head of population for Powys is slightly higher than the all-Wales average. In 2010-2011, the Council set its revenue budget at the level of the Standard Spending Assessment. The education budget was set at 98.9% of the education Indicator Based Assessment (IBA). The net education budget for 2010-2011 represented £5,152 per pupil, the third highest in Wales, compared to an average of £4,800 per pupil for all Wales. This reflects the fact that a high proportion of the county's population lives in small, rural communities and as a result education services are more costly to deliver than in less sparsely populated areas.

Summary

Overall judgement: Adequate

The local authority's education services for children and young people are adequate because:

- standards are generally good;
- standards of wellbeing and engagement of young people are good; and
- elected members have taken difficult decisions recently regarding school closures and restructuring the Council's decision-making and scrutiny processes.

However:

- the authority does not yet undertake quality assurance and evaluation well enough to benefit individual and groups of learners;
- too many schools are in a category of causing concern to Estyn and too many schools have high deficit budgets;
- the authority has been too slow in using its full range of powers to intervene to improve schools and/or their leadership teams and governing bodies;
- elected members do not place enough emphasis on standards and too often put local concerns before the wider interests of learners; and
- the decision-making and scrutiny processes are not effective enough.

Capacity to improve: Adequate

The local authority has adequate prospects for improvement because:

- there is strong commitment to joint working across public services across Powys.

However:

- the authority's track record in securing improvement in schools has been disappointing.

Recommendations

In order to improve, Powys County Council needs to:

- R1 improve the challenge to schools, particularly in relation to evaluating leadership and management, and use its full range of powers to improve schools more quickly;
- R2 improve the consistency and accuracy of teacher assessment at key stages 1 and 2;
- R3 make sure that all schools' additional learning needs (ALN) services are planned and monitored strategically, and make best use of staff expertise;
- R4 improve performance management, including the analysis of the impact of services and resources on all learners and then using the information to plan and prioritise service delivery for the future;
- R5 take effective action to reduce school budget deficits; and
- R6 maintain the momentum of the modernising education programme.

What happens next?

Powys County Council will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 70 days (50 working days) of receipt of the report. Progress in addressing the recommendations will be monitored by Estyn.

Estyn is of the opinion that the authority falls into the category of follow-up and will require an Estyn monitoring visit. The date and focus of this monitoring visit will be determined by Estyn in due course.

During all core inspections, the inspection team consider whether the local authority needs any follow-up activity. There are five types of follow-up activity:

1. Excellent practice case study
2. Link inspector monitoring
3. Estyn monitoring visit
4. Significant improvement
5. Special measures

Any follow-up inspection work will be planned in consideration of other inspection and regulatory activity within an authority. All follow-up inspections will be fed into the Local Authority Regulatory Calendar to avoid duplication and take advantage of any opportunities to work more closely with the Wales Audit Office and CSSIW.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes? Good

Standards: Good

Overall, standards in Powys are good. In 2010, outcomes for national curriculum assessments are similar to the Wales average in key stages 1 and 2, although the percentage gaining the higher levels is lower than that expected. Performance at key stage 3 is the best in Wales. In 2010, performance on many of the main indicators at key stage 4 is among the best in Wales.

When Powys schools are compared to similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, performance is average at key stages 1 and 2 and generally above average at key stages 3 and 4. However, performance on the level 2 threshold (equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A* to C) and the average wider points score (inclusive of all externally approved qualifications at the age of 16) at key stage 4 is below average.

The Welsh Government sets benchmarks for performance based on free school meals. Powys has met or exceeded all except one of the expected benchmarks for the three years to 2009. Benchmark information for 2010 is not yet available.

Learners make good progress to the next stage in their education, training or employment. The percentage of learners not in education, training or employment improved in 2009 and was the lowest in Wales. The percentage of pupils remaining in full-time education at 16 and the percentage of pupils leaving school without a recognised qualification have been consistently among the best in Wales over the last three years.

In all key stages, the gap in performance between boys and girls is smaller than the Wales average. Particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, generally attain at or above expected levels. Learners make good progress in gaining skills in first and second language Welsh and, overall, the standards they achieve in both subjects are good.

There are a few examples of young people achieving well in informal and non-formal settings but generally this data is not collected and analysed well enough to reflect the full range.

Wellbeing: Good

Standards of wellbeing are generally good. The authority has a wide range of initiatives and strategies that promote participation in and enjoyment of learning.

Overall, young people engage well in education. Take-up by young people of the Powys local authority youth service is good at 25% of the youth population.

Since 2007, attendance in secondary schools has improved slightly and is now the fourth best in Wales. Attendance in primary schools has remained the same, but its relative ranking has dropped to sixth in Wales. The rates of fixed term exclusions of five days or less are good in comparison with the rest of Wales, but exclusion rates of six days or more are only adequate. Young people excluded from school who want advocacy support make good use of the Tros Gynnal advocacy service.

The Children and Young People's Partnership has made good progress in many of its targets to increase opportunities for young people. There are good strategies to help young people adopt and develop healthier lifestyles, through programmes on healthy eating, exercise, substance misuse, and sexual health.

Many learners take advantage of the wide variety of physical activities in education, leisure and community settings. Staff have put in place ways for young people to discuss school meal menus and nutritional standards. This good work is helping improve young people's awareness of the importance of eating and living more healthy lifestyles.

Young people engage well with the local authority and its partners through the Powys Youth Forum and the Junior Local Safeguarding Children's Board (locally named as 'Eat Carrots be Safe from Elephants'). These young people develop their communication skills well. They have contributed well to the development of planning and policy, and raised awareness of young people's issues among key elected members and officers to develop new services.

However, the quality of the individual consultation groups that feed into the Powys youth forum varies considerably, with school councils in particular in need of challenge, monitoring, support and development. Where consultation groups do not focus on giving young people the opportunity to make a real difference, they are not very effective in developing young people's citizenship skills or understanding of democracy.

Key Question 2: How good is provision? Adequate

Support for School Improvement: Adequate

The authority has improved its processes to support, challenge and intervene in schools. It sets out clear criteria in the Partnership Agreement and most schools understand well the support they will receive. Officers analyse performance data well and carry out a structured programme of reviews with schools. They attend governing body meetings in most schools to present the outcomes of these reviews. However, they do not yet evaluate consistently enough all aspects of leadership and management in schools, particularly in secondary schools.

These arrangements have enabled officers to improve standards and provision in a few underperforming schools. However, the authority does not use the full range of powers available to it and, as a result, is not able to improve all schools quickly enough to prevent them being identified by Estyn as causing concern. At present two primary schools are in special measures and three primary schools require significant improvement.

The authority has recently restructured the schools service into School Effectiveness Teams. Officers from school improvement and inclusion services are beginning to work together more effectively to support and improve schools. Processes to quality assure the work of officers and the challenge they bring to schools are improving.

The authority supports a range of useful initiatives that address national priorities. There is good support for Welsh as a first and second language and for literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Support for ICT is not as strong. The authority also provides good support for the introduction of the Foundation Phase. Curriculum support in secondary schools is less consistent.

Teacher assessments at the end of key stages 1 and 2 are not moderated rigorously enough across the authority to make sure that they accurately reflect pupils' achievement.

The authority provides good support for leaders in schools including area network meetings and the use of peer mentors. Support for governors is generally good.

Support for Additional Learning Needs: Adequate

Nearly all pupils have access to a wide range of appropriate support and provision and consequently they make good progress. Monitoring of individual pupils' progress at a school level is good, but the authority does not have an effective system for collating and evaluating this data to help plan provision for additional learning needs (ALN) strategically.

The authority has clear criteria, procedures and decision-making processes to assess and decide on the nature of support for pupils with ALN. Generally, headteachers understand these processes well.

Recent delegation of ALN funding to schools enables headteachers to use resources in a flexible manner to meet pupils' needs. For example, headteachers in some schools have replaced part-time support for individual pupils with targeted intervention for small groups where it would be more efficient and effective to do so. However, not all special needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) are clear about the level of funding and resources provided to their own schools.

Co-ordinated joint working with a range of multi-agency partners through the Local Resource Solution Panels is developing well. This is a recent initiative and early indications suggest that these panels are responding effectively to specific individual need.

The restructuring of the schools' service is having a positive impact on service provision for pupils with ALN. The improved transparency of the service enables officers to support and challenge schools in a more joined-up way. The educational psychology service provides good support to individual pupils and sound advice to schools on how best to meet pupils' needs. However, despite this good work, they are not contributing enough to the wider school effectiveness agenda to improve standards and progress for all pupils.

The authority provides appropriately focused and effective training to build the capacity of mainstream schools to meet a range of pupils' additional learning needs. This training is most effective in school cluster areas where sufficient resources and provision are in place.

The outreach staff from special schools offer good advice, support and guidance to other mainstream schools through the Welsh Government 'Unlocking the Potential' initiative.

The authority has been proactive in reducing the number of statements from 851 in 2006-2007 to 680 in 2009-2010, but the rate is still too high. However, there has been a significant increase in appeals registered to tribunal over the last year as parents have not been secure enough with the provision made without a statement.

Only one authority in Wales has a higher percentage of pupils with statements educated other than at school. In addition, the authority does not have sufficiently rigorous monitoring procedures for the children that parents elect to educate at home.

Communication and consultation with parents have improved, but information is not always clear enough for all parents. For example, the authority's website does not provide enough information about services to let parents know where they can go for advice and support, such as to the charity 'SNAP Cymru'.

Promoting Social Inclusion and wellbeing: Adequate

Progress since the last inspection in this area is adequate.

Behaviour support is satisfactory. However, the authority itself did not know how well the service was performing, although appropriately identifying the need to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of behaviour support services as a priority. The impact of behaviour support is currently not evaluated well enough.

Within the Complementary Education Service, there has been a good focus on the recommendations of previous Estyn inspection reports. The authority has begun to strengthen the structure of this service. However, in two locations, sharing of premises restricts the development of provision and how much can take place. Services to Gypsy Traveller children have improved and there is good attention to individual needs.

All schools have anti-bullying policies. However at a strategic level, there is not yet a system to monitor the impact of these policies. Nearly all schools have a race equality policy, with most having a policy matched to their own circumstances.

There is a Corporate Parenting Strategy led by the Corporate Parenting Group. Looked-after children receive good support. However there is not enough evaluation of the progress that looked-after children make to inform the strategic planning of their support. For example, there is no clear overview of how well looked-after children progress into post-16 options.

Support for attendance is adequate, but Education Welfare Officers' caseloads are too high. Recent staffing reduction in the Education Welfare service represents a risk to the capacity of this service.

The Children and Young People's Plan gives a good focus to identifying need and to promoting inclusion. There is a good range of partners involved in its development. There is also a helpful website that enables young people to find out about the range of opportunities and services available to them. Attendance at youth clubs is already good and is growing, and these learners have good access to informal learning leading to accreditation. The youth service is making good progress in developing Welsh-medium provision.

The local authority has a clear policy and procedures relating to safeguarding. Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau disclosures are in place for adults working with children, including school governors. An appropriate and comprehensive training programme is in place in respect of safeguarding and child protection. The Junior Safeguarding Children's Board (known locally as 'Eat Carrots be Safe from Elephants') provides excellent opportunities for young people to have an input into safeguarding issues.

Access and school places: Adequate

The authority is working satisfactorily to modernise its schools in a county where the population is dispersed. It has reduced net unfilled places in primary schools by almost six percentage points since the last inspection in 2007 and reduced overall capacity in primary schools by almost 1,400 places in the last three years. The authority did this at a time when average net unfilled places in Wales increased. The percentage of primary schools with significant surpluses has reduced by eight percentage points since 2008.

The authority is making good progress to modernise and improve primary school sites. It intends to reduce surplus places by 8.5% by 2017. It is working well with project boards, involving a range of stakeholders, in five strategic areas to identify the best way forward in each area. Plans to build four new schools and refurbish a high school by 2012 are well underway in one area, and the authority is proposing to build two new schools and refurbish three others in a second area. Since 2008, the local authority has built four new primary schools and remodelled another.

The total capacity of secondary schools has remained at the same level for three years. Net unfilled places in secondary schools have risen in Powys since 2008 at a slightly faster rate than the all-Wales average. The percentage of secondary schools with significant surplus places has grown by almost eight percentage points since 2008.

The authority has recently begun a process of public consultation about proposals for secondary school and post-16 modernisation. These include:

- changing the management arrangements and age ranges of secondary schools;
- investing in community-focused services;
- reducing unfilled places; and
- improving efficiency and financial viability.

However, the authority's proposals do not give enough consideration to the provision available from Welsh-medium and post-16 providers on its borders.

The authority provides good information for parents regarding admissions to schools. It works well with schools to allocate places to pupils within appropriate time scales.

Overall planning and forecasting to meet the needs of learners who want Welsh-medium education are weak.

The authority has good procedures in place to make sure that there is enough early years provision available across the county.

The range of youth support services available to young people in Powys is good. The Children and Young People's Partnership has made steady progress in addressing previous inspection recommendations. It has improved multi-agency co-operation, joint planning and joint working. In particular, young people have better access to Welsh-medium youth service provision, and those young people with disabilities have better access to mainstream youth support services. However, changes to the funding for youth support services means that the maintenance and development of these services are uncertain.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management? Adequate

Leadership: Adequate

Elected members have taken some difficult decisions in the last three years. These include the closure of schools. However, on occasions too many elected members put their local concerns before the wider strategic interests of learners across Powys. In addition, decisions and their implementation are sometimes too slow.

The authority is in a period of significant change. Previously elected members have found it difficult to scrutinise decisions adequately. Portfolio holders are too often operational rather than strategic. The authority has taken a good decision in making changes to the governance structures, earlier than required by the recent Local Government Measure, and to establish a Cabinet system from May 2011. These changes aim to clarify roles and responsibilities, speed up the decision-making process and improve processes for scrutiny. The local authority has taken good steps to ensure a transfer of expertise between elected members into its proposed Cabinet.

Although elected members are beginning to understand the standards agenda better, they do not always take enough account of, or place enough emphasis on the standards and benefits to learners when they make their strategic decisions. However, there are good plans to place a greater emphasis on outcomes. The One Powys Yn Un corporate plan aims to align the most strategic plans, reduce working in silos and lead to greater joined-up thinking to benefit services and learners. The authority's recent appointments of a new Chief Executive, a new Director of Finance and a corporate director who is also the chief education officer, together with a directorate restructure, make learning more central to the authority's thinking than was the case previously.

Schools report that they are now more confident in the authority's leadership and support than at the time of the previous inspection. However, the authority does not always engage all of its stakeholders effectively in its plans and vision. The authority does not always communicate well enough with school leadership teams and governing bodies to ensure consistency of approach across the authority.

The authority is beginning to hold services, schools and governing bodies to greater account for their performance and their financial management. However, it does not always provide a rigorous enough challenge to school leadership teams and governing bodies of the poorer performing schools. In addition, the challenge is often provided too late and is not provided by staff of sufficient seniority.

Improving quality: Adequate

Powys appropriately uses the Children and Young People's Partnership as the overarching strategic body for the planning, development, joint commissioning and review of services for children and young people. Children and young people's participation in the planning, reviewing and commissioning of services has improved significantly since the last inspection.

The authority provided a comprehensive and detailed self-evaluation report (SER) for the inspection. This was developed through improving consultation processes with a wide range of stakeholders.

The Partnership has a clear performance management framework that has contributed well to its self-assessment and to the evidence for the inspection. Evaluative data from education and other related services was also included in the inspection SER. The authority is implementing an outcome-based methodology across services in order to improve outcome assessments, but it is too early to judge the impact of this on standards for learners. Performance management and self-evaluation focus too much on separate outcomes and evaluations rather than on analyses of the qualitative impact of provision on learners.

The authority has only recently begun to improve its management of services through a new corporate performance management framework (Ffynnon), alongside the corporate Change Plan. However, whilst this framework aims to manage better the delivery of objectives, there is no system to evaluate the impact of educational and other support services on the health and wellbeing of learners.

The schools' service uses data well to identify trends, areas for improvement and priorities in relation to standards. Elected members receive good and timely information on school performance. However, strategic leaders and managers do not always use performance information well enough to bring about improvements in a timely manner. For example, the authority has not addressed high levels of financial deficits in a few schools nor has it taken action to support and prevent schools going into Estyn categories following inspections.

The Partnership and schools use professional networks well to develop better professional understanding across multi-agency services. For example, documents such as the schools' services professional development catalogue and the

Partnership's integrated training brochure give good opportunities for all engaged in education and support services to receive training in a wide range of topics. The authority is also an active member of the regional network (SWAMWAC) and other networks, which help to share good practice across the region.

The local authority has made satisfactory progress against the findings and recommendations from the previous Estyn inspection.

Partnership working: Adequate

The authority demonstrates a strong commitment to collaborative and partnership working across public services for Powys. It has ambitious plans for partnership working, which include the work of the Powys Local Service Board (LSB).

The authority works well with the Regional Partnership Board and other strategic partnerships, to make sure that education services for learners are a key priority. Consultation on planning post-16 learning is ongoing, but there has not been enough exploration of how well options of provision in neighbouring authorities might improve learner access and also improve routes for progression.

The Partnership has improved over recent years. It has a clear structure that is based on a four-tier system, reflecting universal and specialist support services well. It also has good strategic support from senior leaders of services in both statutory and voluntary sectors. Senior leaders have clear priorities to support learners to progress.

The good development of multi-agency and local panels, such as the local resource solution panels (LRSPs), gives the Partnership a positive foundation for further improvement of multi-agency working. This structure, together with the good use of their common assessment framework and information sharing protocol, helps service users. However, the outcomes of services are not analysed thoroughly enough to plan effectively for service improvement.

The Partnership ensures good multi-agency support for pre-school children and their families. It has responded well to changes in early years funding, analysing the position, allocating extra resources to maintain provision, and lowering the age at which children can start school.

However, the Partnership does not analyse well enough the implications of planned resource reductions across the Partnership. This means that the Partnership is not able to identify accurately where and how gaps in services will impact on learners, and to plan effectively to meet prioritised needs.

Resource management: Adequate

The authority has a sound track record of controlling its own budgets but too many of its schools have budget deficits.

The authority is making effective use of capital resources to deliver the modernisation education programme. In addition to the Welshgrant, the authority has invested in

the programme through capital receipts and prudential borrowing. In planning the future modernisation programme, uncertainties about future grants are being appropriately taken account of in the planning process.

The inspection in 2007 recommended that schools and service managers needed to develop their own capacity to manage resources. Some action has been taken but to date the authority has not fully met this recommendation.

Further ALN resources have been delegated, and the formula for delegating these resources is appropriate. School effectiveness officers challenge schools on their use of ALN resources and further work is in progress to compare the outcomes from the use of resources between different schools.

The authority has not yet developed comprehensive financial plans to deliver its improvement objectives and has yet to align its medium-term financial plan to its improvement priorities. Performance management and evaluation frameworks are not sufficiently linked to the resource allocation processes. This applies directly to the education services, but also to the whole range of services funded through partnership arrangements, including the youth support service. As a result, education services are not able to judge effectively the value for money of their services.

Too many schools have budget deficits. Fourteen schools, including nine primary schools, have small deficits that are not licensed. The local authority is working with these schools to put in place budget recovery plans. However, in the secondary sector in particular, reductions in pupil numbers and pressures on post-16 funding in Powys mean that it is difficult for schools to recover from their deficits. Most of the deficits in secondary schools are high.

Powys County Council provides adequate value for money.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

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