

Mr Jeremy Patterson
Chief Executive
Powys County Council
County Hall
Spa Road East
Llandrindod Wells, Powys
LD1 5LG

20 June 2014

Dear Mr Patterson

Estyn monitoring visit, 19-22 May 2014

Following Estyn's inspection of education services for children and young people in February 2011, the authority was identified as requiring follow-up through Estyn monitoring. The authority's progress was monitored in October 2012. Inspectors found that too little progress had been made against the recommendations and the authority was found to be in need of significant improvement. A monitoring plan was subsequently agreed with your Estyn link inspectors. The first monitoring visit for this plan took place from the 23-25 October 2013. The second and final monitoring visit took place from 19-22 May 2014. This letter records the final outcomes of Estyn's post-inspection monitoring.

In May 2014 Mererid Stone HMI led a team of four inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the remaining three of the eight recommendations arising from the original inspection and from the October 2012 monitoring visit. The team also considered the overall performance of the authority against its post-inspection action plan.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers and partner representatives. Inspectors scrutinised documentation, including evidence on the progress made on each of Estyn's recommendations.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported their findings to you as the chief executive, and to the leader of the council, the cabinet member for education and the interim head of the schools service. The director and head of learning services from Ceredigion were also present together with the head of the Powys-Ceredigion hub of the regional school improvement service.

Powys County Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of February 2011 and the monitoring visit of October 2012. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the local authority is no longer in need of significant improvement and is removing it from further follow-up activity.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Since the Estyn monitoring visit in October 2012 there has been significant change leading to improvement both corporately and within the Schools' Service.

Following the monitoring visit elected members and the chief executive moved to bring about changes at corporate and service levels to improve learner outcomes. Specifically, they recognised that urgent improvements were needed in the strategic planning, self-evaluation and performance management of the education services for children and young people. The chief executive took swift and decisive action to remove barriers to progress. The authority took an enterprising decision to approach Ceredigion County Council about collaborative working. As a result they secured, and have successfully implemented, effective joint working arrangements.

During this period, the chief executive has assumed the statutory role of director of education, with Ceredigion County Council leading the improvement process alongside senior managers of Powys Schools' Service. The involvement of senior officers from Ceredigion has made a significant difference to the progress made by the council, the Schools' Service and the authority's schools. Their involvement has enabled the authority to undertake a complete reconfiguration of the service in order to bring about sustainable improvement.

Much of this work has been driven by the introduction from Ceredigion of a comprehensive and robust planning and accountability framework. This consists of detailed plans at several levels from personal development plans to service plans, and business plans. All of these plans have nominated responsible officers and all feed into the education service business plan, which incorporates the Estyn post-inspection action plan. This framework is underpinned by an agreed reporting structure to cabinet and to performance scrutiny, with quarterly review dates for each plan.

There is now much greater transparency in the work of the service and also in its communications with schools. The authority has improved the engagement of stakeholders in its decisions.

Strong joint working between system leaders and other officers from Powys and Ceredigion has contributed significantly to the improvement within the Schools' Service. Both cabinets have now agreed to formalise the partnership with Ceredigion through the Ceredigion-Powys hub within the regional school improvement service.

Recommendation 1

Develop effective self-evaluation procedures (R1 from 2012 monitoring visit)

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority has made very good progress in improving its arrangements for self-evaluation both corporately and within the Schools' Service.

There is a clear corporate process to evaluate service improvement plans and the Powys One Plan, the council's single integrated plan. Performance indicators and actions are monitored quarterly and are recorded through a red, amber, green (RAG) rating system that identifies how well each is being delivered as well as a commentary on the effectiveness of actions. Any remedial action is identified. These quarterly reviews are drawn together across all services and reported to cabinet and to performance scrutiny in order to hold officers to account for their actions.

The Powys Change Plan, the council's improvement plan, is evaluated through robust 'Performance Evaluation Grids'. These grids provide a consistent and effective model to evaluate actions and impact as well as clearly identifying what further work needs to be done. Evidence is embedded in these documents, which are available for senior officers and scrutiny members to view. The quarterly reviews build up an ongoing record over time, which then feeds into the 'Performance Evaluation Grids' for the annual performance review.

An 'Annual Performance Report' was published at the end of October 2013, which used these processes appropriately to identify priority areas for improvement. These are now embedded firmly within the One Powys Plan, approved by the council in April 2014.

There are clear and rigorous arrangements for self-evaluation in the Schools' Service through the accountability framework. Officers review plans through the quarterly review process. Each level feeds to that above and results in a clear evaluation of progress against the service business plan. New priorities appropriately emerge from these reviews if evaluation identifies that they are necessary.

Officers responsible for areas of work understand well that they must rigorously evaluate the progress made and are accountable for it. Individual officers now take greater ownership for progress in the service and are challenged more rigorously about this. They are clearer about what they should be doing, how they will know when they have done it well enough and whether it has brought about improvement. Senior officers are kept well informed about progress and emerging areas for improvement.

The Schools' Service now involves stakeholders more actively in the evaluation of progress. The 'School Improvement Consultative Group' and the 'Governors Consultative Group' effectively engage a wider range of stakeholders in challenging the service. The authority has also developed a useful annual on-line school perception survey, which contributes to its evaluation of progress.

The authority provided a helpful self-evaluation report before the monitoring visit. It was evaluative and realistic and provided an update of the progress made against those recommendations monitored in October 2013 as well as a thorough evaluation of the remaining recommendations. It provided an accurate overview of the progress made and identified clearly areas for further development. Key elected members and headteachers contributed well to this self-evaluation.

Member scrutiny and challenge are good. There are 12 scrutiny working groups considering different aspects of service delivery and they are rigorous in their questioning. The education scrutiny working group effectively holds members and officers to account. Officers from the Schools' Service have worked well with scrutiny to make sure improvement happens at a rapid pace. These officers respond well when challenged by scrutiny and make appropriate changes. The education scrutiny working group has produced a very clear and useful report on the progress made in the last year. This report is evaluative and thorough and includes clear recommendations to the portfolio-holder for learning.

The Powys Change Plan has benefited from robust internal challenge. In the Improvement Assessment letter of September 2013, Wales Audit Office stated that "The chairs and vice chairs of scrutiny provided a robust challenge to the draft plan and identified many opportunities to clarify the content. The council took action to address the issues raised, by revising the draft plan or agreeing to reflect the comments in subsequent plans. Where such action was not considered appropriate, officers provided members with the reasons why."

Recommendation 2

Make sure that performance management processes are robust and hold officers to account (R2 from 2012 monitoring visit)

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority has made good progress in improving the rigour and consistency of performance management within the Schools' Service. The introduction of the accountability framework has brought a robust approach to performance management. It provides clear lines of accountability from individual officers through to the cabinet member and the education scrutiny committee. Senior officers and cabinet members are engaged in robust reviews of performance and action planning.

Every member of the Schools' Service has an annual appraisal interview. From this interview their priorities for the year are identified and linked to any appropriate plans. These become the individual's personal plan against which performance is regularly monitored. In addition, those responsible for plans at other levels have quarterly supervisions to monitor progress. The cabinet member for learning also holds quarterly performance monitoring meetings with high level plan holders. Progress on all plans is reported to the education scrutiny working group.

The corporate performance management system is currently being improved based on a performance improvement framework. Practice in the Schools' Service is already aligned with this framework. The work that has happened in education to improve performance management and self-evaluation is being incorporated in the corporate framework. Officers are learning from the progress made in education and embedding these into the corporate system.

Recommendation 3

Ensure that the work of the Schools Service is planned effectively, quality assured rigorously and evaluated robustly in order to improve its impact upon learners (R3 from 2012 monitoring visit)

This recommendation is largely addressed.

The authority, in collaboration with senior officers from Ceredigion, has significantly improved processes to support, challenge and intervene in its schools. There is a more open and collaborative culture and schools have greater opportunities to influence the work of the Schools' Service.

The authority has considerably strengthened its team of system leaders since October 2012. These officers generally know schools very well and analyse thoroughly a wide range of performance data. With support from Ceredigion the authority has gathered detailed data on the performance of every pupil, including those with additional learning needs. System leaders use this data robustly to challenge underperformance and to raise teachers' expectations for their pupils.

System leaders now use the regional framework more rigorously to categorise schools according to risk, although judgements on leadership and management in a few schools remain too generous. Schools understand the category their school is in and the support they will receive as a result.

Officers carry out a comprehensive programme of visits to schools focusing appropriately on those schools that need to improve the most. During these visits, officers monitor progress towards agreed targets, scrutinise pupils' work and undertake detailed reviews of standards and provision in literacy and numeracy. Where they identify underperformance, a programme of intervention is put in place, involving classroom teachers as well as senior and middle leaders. This includes effective support to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy in both primary and secondary schools. System leaders thoroughly evaluate progress each half-term. As a result, schools are clear about the areas that need to improve and work to a consistent agenda through the year.

The authority has developed an effective system to make sure that all planned support can be delivered when required. This good practice is now being shared with other authorities within the regional consortium.

The quality of written records of reviews and other visits to schools has improved significantly. These notes are generally evaluative, accurately identify areas for improvement and set appropriate targets and timescales. They clearly set out actions for the school and for the authority in order to bring about improvement. The interim head of schools and the senior system leader have introduced effective processes to develop officers' skills and to quality assure their work. As a result, the consistency of challenge brought to schools has improved.

The authority has provided useful training for governing bodies to help them understand the performance of their schools. System leaders attend governing body meetings in targeted schools to report on the quality of standards and provision. There is good support for new leaders in schools.

Fewer schools have gone into a category of concern at inspection since the monitoring visit of October 2012. The authority has begun to use its full powers to make sure that schools improve quickly enough, and senior officers and key elected members are increasingly involved in robustly holding school leaders to account. Senior officers have effectively tackled issues with leadership in schools and have taken difficult decisions to deal with underperformance. As a result, the authority has improved targeted schools and prevented them from becoming causes for concern. However, too few schools are identified with excellent practice during inspection.

Unverified data indicates that, in 2014, performance has improved on all indicators in the Foundation Phase and in key stages 2 and 3. Rigorous monitoring of progress in secondary schools suggests that key stage 4 performance will improve in at least the majority of schools in 2014.

Recommendation 4

Ensure that strategic planning is focused consistently on achieving better outcomes for learners and that it is responsive to Welsh Government guidance on single plans (R4 from 2012 monitoring visit)

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority has improved and clarified the strategic planning process, which is now more consistently focused on achieving better outcomes for learners.

The implementation of a long-term, structured approach to service improvement with clear operational and strategic planning processes gives clearer direction to all involved in the planning and delivery of education services. Alongside this, the robust accountability framework gives clear guidance on the detailed actions required at every level in order to secure and maintain the improvements. All of these link clearly to the Powys Change Plan for 2013-2016.

The Powys Change Plan is the council's key transformation document and clearly articulates the council's vision and aspirations. Recommendations from regulators are firmly embedded in the plan and there is an unbroken link running from high-level strategy, through to service improvement plans. The Schools' Service is fully engaged within the planning framework to ensure that improving learner outcomes is at the core of the council's business and the development of the single integrated plan.

The integration of the Powys Change Plan into the One Powys Plan was completed on time and received council approval in April 2014. This combined plan has five priority areas. Each priority is underpinned by a delivery board, and links to education services for children and young people are clear within these.

The council and the Local Service Board partners have planned to deliver services at a local level, according to the community's needs. This complies with Welsh Government guidance on integrating partnerships and plans.

The council is further strengthening this new planning process with a stronger focus on budget priorities, specifically ensuring that school budgets will be included in the mid-term (three year) financial plan and service improvement plans. This clearly links planning and finance to improving outcomes for learners.

Recommendation 5

Take timely action to deliver its education modernisation programme (R5 from 2012 monitoring visit)

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The chief executive officer has a clear vision for school modernisation. Decisions taken on amalgamations and closures increasingly consider the standards achieved by schools and projected population figures aligned to local development plans. Senior officers and council members work well together. They often make difficult decisions within a short space of time to improve provision for learners. Members are willing to put the strategic interests of Powys above local issues. For example, officers and members acted speedily to propose the closure of John Beddoes High School. The school has now been amalgamated with Newtown High School under joint management arrangements.

The authority has good consultation processes in place for all school modernisation projects. These ensure that staff, pupils, governors, parents and the local community have a clear understanding of proposals for the closure and amalgamation of schools. Public meetings enable different groups to put forward their views and those consulted now better understand decisions even though they may not agree with the outcomes. The local authority takes an appropriate range of factors into consideration when coming to decisions about closures and amalgamations of schools. As a result of this process, the authority has successfully closed a large number of primary schools and federated others and reduced the level of surplus places in primary schools to 14%. With further planned reductions over the next 12 months, the authority is well ahead of schedule to meet the Welsh Government's target of a maximum of 15% of primary school surplus places by January 2016.

An independent review of the viability of existing secondary school provision due to falling numbers is currently underway and the cabinet will consider the outcomes of this in the next few months to further inform their decisions over future secondary and post-16 provision.

The 'School Programme Delivery Board' monitors carefully the progress of project plans. It ensures that appropriate risk assessments are in place to address potential threats to the successful completion of projects. Examples include the successful re-modelling of buildings at Maesydderwen and the establishment of a new 4 to 18 years school in Machynlleth from 1 September 2014.

Recommendation 6

Improve the consistency and accuracy of teacher assessment at key stages 1 and 2 (R2 from 2011 inspection)

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The established partnership with the Ceredigion School Improvement Service is successfully raising the level of challenge provided by the local authority to all of its schools. During the headteachers' conference in April 2013, data from all schools was shared and comparisons made with other schools within the authority, other

authorities in Wales and free-school-meal benchmark quartiles. The conference successfully raised headteachers' awareness of underperformance in the core subjects.

Outcomes from the new national reading and numeracy tests indicated that teacher assessment at the end of the Foundation Phase and key stages 2 and 3 were not accurate enough. Consequently, standardisation and moderation at an authority level have been strengthened and clear expectations shared with schools. This resulted in challenges in schools where system leaders identified underperformance in data at pupil level. In the case of some challenges, schools provided valid explanations for the potential underperformance. However, in other cases, this led to the revisiting of assessments and resulting changes in line with 'best fit' principles to reflect pupil progress more accurately.

A cross-Powys moderation day in April 2014, involving all primary school teachers and relevant secondary teachers, had a focus on strengthening of the accuracy of teacher assessments. Collaboration and sharing of good practice helped to improve most teachers' skills to assess pupils' work more accurately. The forthcoming corroboration of assessments in comparisons with the outcomes from national tests form part of the robust quality assurance process, which is now in place.

Recommendation 7

Make sure that all schools' additional learning needs (ALN) services are planned and monitored strategically, and make best use of staff expertise (R3 from 2011 inspection)

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Since the last visit, the authority has shown a clear commitment to developing services for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN).

With the support of Ceredigion Council, the authority now has a clear policy and strategy in relation to educating children and young people with special educational needs (SEN).

After the monitoring visit in October 2012, strategic management for ALN was provided by officers from Ceredigion because the authority appropriately recognised its lack of capacity to deliver ALN services at a strategic level. A new ALN manager has now been appointed and, in addition, the authority has advertised for a behaviour support manager.

The authority now has a clear understanding of what needs to be done to improve ALN services. Strategic planning for ALN is firmly established through the Schools' Service accountability framework. Improvement plans clearly identify sources of funding and set out realistic timescales for delivery. The authority has clear processes in place for monitoring progress against actions.

In 2013, the authority commissioned a review of educational provision for pupils with ALN and a review of provision for behaviour support. These comprehensive reviews accurately identified strengths and shortcomings in current provision and resulted in a clear set of recommendations.

The ALN review appropriately identified the need to consider the role and function of the authority's specialist centres, and recommended that the authority should decide whether to maintain, close or change the use of each existing centre. Key to this is the principle that all pupils across Powys should have access to effective provision that meets their needs, and that, where possible, pupils should be educated in their local mainstream schools.

Between February and March 2014, the authority carried out a formal consultation on a proposal to close its pre-school assessment units and primary specialist support units, and to establish a central team of specialist advisory teachers and teaching assistants. With the support of the Ceredigion schools service, they are currently reviewing the information received and are due to present a report to cabinet in July.

The authority appropriately recognises the importance of planning carefully for any change in relation to the units. This includes the need to up-skill staff in mainstream schools, through the appointment of a central team of specialist staff, and the development of a comprehensive training programme. Funding for the employment of five advisory teachers and five teaching assistants has been secured. It is proposed that these staff should be in place by the autumn term. Their role will be to provide advice and challenge to mainstream schools.

Within Powys, support for ALN is seen as an integral part of school improvement. This is good practice. In order to develop this further, the new team of advisory teachers and assistants will be managed by a system leader.

During the past year, the introduction of a comprehensive pupil level database has enabled officers to monitor the progress of pupils with ALN more effectively, and to provide more rigorous challenge to schools. The authority has also started to use this data effectively to inform planning at a strategic level.

The authority has also recognised the need to review the formula for the funding of SEN in mainstream schools, and plans to introduce a new model for primary schools in April 2015. This is aimed at ensuring a more effective and efficient use of resources, with a simplified funding formula.

Recommendation 8

Take effective action to reduce school budget deficits (R5 from 2011 inspection)

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

In July 2012, the cabinet agreed strict criteria for the management of large school budget deficits. The criteria included a loan facility with tightly defined conditions and the requirement for schools to produce appropriate and fully costed recovery plans with clear timescales, subject to approval at strategic director level. These measures, together with good interim support for identified schools on financial and curriculum matters, helped to improve schools' capacity to manage their budgets more effectively. As a result, by the end of the 2013-2014 financial year, most identified schools were on track to resolve their budget issues through carefully planned measures.

In addition, the authority recognised that longer-term solutions were necessary through revised systems to support the effective projection and planning of budgets for all its schools. As a result, in the late autumn of 2012, the authority, in partnership with officers from Ceredigion, formed a working group to review the formula for funding schools. The aim of the review was to make the way in which money was delegated to schools a more fair and transparent process. At the same time, the authority provided training on good practice financial management for headteachers and governors. This helped to improve understanding of the legal responsibilities on schools and governing bodies when setting their budgets.

The revised formula appropriately takes into account projected pupil numbers and includes a lump sum for all schools. It provides for three-year financial projections to help schools plan their budgets and staffing levels over a longer period. The scheme, approved by the cabinet in the early spring of 2014, comes into effect for the 2014-2015 financial year and will be fully phased in by April 2017. The new arrangements provide tighter financial controls on schools to ensure that most balance their budgets within a three-year period.

In May 2014, the cabinet approved further refinements to the scheme. These include introducing claw-back arrangements for schools with significant budget surpluses over a sustained period and also reducing the time for licensed deficits to a maximum of three years. Schools with deficit budgets are now required to submit recovery plans to the local authority for approval within an appropriate timescale.

At the same time as they were revising the funding formula for schools, the authority began to re-organise its schools service to include better financial and human resources support for all schools leading to the creation of new service-level agreements. The newly created posts of schools' finance officer and a senior human resources business partner, together with dedicated support teams, should improve the authority's capacity to provide greater levels of support and challenge to schools on budget and staffing issues based on curriculum needs.

Next steps

The authority should continue to work to improve its provision for pupils with additional learning needs. Your link inspectors will continue their work with the authority, in their normal link role.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and the Wales Audit Office for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Wales Audit Office
CCBC Director of Education and Lifelong Learning