



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

**Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Port Talbot
SA13 1PJ**

Date of inspection: December 2017

by

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

About Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

Background information

Neath Port Talbot is located in South West Wales. The total population of Neath Port Talbot is 141,588. The local authority maintains 66 schools.

The local authority was last inspected in November 2010. The chief executive was appointed in November 2009 and the director for education, leisure and lifelong learning has been in post since May 2013. The council leader has been in post since May 2017 and the main portfolio holder for education services has been in post since May 2013.

Neath Port Talbot is one of six local authorities in the ERW regional consortium for school improvement.

Inspectors take account of a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating outcomes and the quality of education services. This information is considered alongside information about the national population. Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Neath Port Talbot is noted below:

- 22.6% of pupils aged 5-15 years are eligible for free school meals, higher than the Wales average of 17.8% and second highest overall
- 13.4% of pupils are fluent in Welsh, lower than the Wales average of 16.3%
- 5.7% of pupils are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 10.6%
- 26.1% of pupils have special educational needs, higher than the Wales average of 22.6%
- 124 children per 10,000 are looked after by the local authority, higher than the Wales average of 95 children per 10,000

Summary

Overall learners make strong progress over time from their low starting points to when they leave statutory school education. In key stage 4, pupils perform well. However, performance in primary schools does not compare well with that of similar authorities.

Officers in Neath Port Talbot know their schools well. Challenge advisers and teacher development officers work appropriately in partnership with schools. There are useful arrangements to monitor and challenge schools according to their level of support identified through the national categorisation system.

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for ensuring effective education provision in Neath Port Talbot. They communicate this vision well with partners and stakeholders. They have a comprehensive understanding of the key challenges facing the education service and individual schools. However, officers do not consistently evaluate their work well enough and the processes for managing risk are not robust enough.

Inspection area	Judgement
Outcomes	Good
Quality of education services	Good
Leadership and management	Good

Recommendations

- R1 Improve standards in primary schools
- R2 Improve the quality of self-evaluation, improvement planning and risk management across all education services
- R3 Ensure that pupils in key stage 4 follow suitable learning pathways that enable them to progress into appropriate further education, employment or training
- R4 Take action to address the safeguarding management issues identified during the inspection

What happens next

The provider will include actions to address the recommendations in its improvement plan. Estyn inspectors will monitor the local authority's progress against these recommendations during their link visits.

Main findings

Outcomes: Good

The local authority has one of the highest levels of deprivation in Wales. On entry to school, children in Neath Port Talbot have weaker skills, such as communication skills, than their peers in many other local authorities. However, from this low starting point, learners make strong progress over the course of their statutory education and generally have good outcomes by the age of 16.

Overall, secondary schools perform well and standards at key stage 4 compare well with those in similar authorities across Wales. As a result of a significant focus on English or Welsh first language and mathematics, standards in these subjects have been strong for several years.

For many of the key performance indicators at key stage 4, there are typically twice as many high-performing schools in Neath Port Talbot compared to the national average, when schools are compared with each other based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals.

However, primary schools do not perform as strongly as secondary schools. Taking into account the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, the outcomes of pupils are lower than the national average.

Over the last three years, the proportion of primary schools inspected in Neath Port Talbot that have required monitoring or were placed in a statutory category of follow-up is nearly twice the national average. It is more than five years since a primary school in the authority has been judged as having excellent standards.

Vulnerable learners, including pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with special educational needs, broadly perform in line with the average for their peers across Wales.

The proportion of young people who do not continue in education after key stage 4 or progress into employment or training has reduced in line with the Wales average in the last few years, but remains amongst the highest in Wales.

When compared with similar schools nationally, attendance rates in Neath Port Talbot schools have been close to average in recent years. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent has also been broadly in line with the national average.

The rate of pupils being given a fixed-term exclusion from school of five days or less has remained fairly static, and in line with the national average, for several years. The rate of pupils being given a fixed-term exclusion from school of over five days has more than halved in recent years, and compares favourably with the national average. Although only a small number of pupils are permanently excluded from school in the authority, the rate has been amongst the highest in Wales for several years.

School inspections have found that nearly all pupils feel safe in Neath Port Talbot schools. The proportion of schools where standards of wellbeing are judged good or better in inspections over the last three years is broadly in line with the national average.

Overall, children and young people in Neath Port Talbot have a positive attitude towards physical health, shown by high levels of participation in a wide range of activities. For example, a higher proportion than the national average are involved in extra-curricular sport at least once a week.

The proportion of young people engaging with activities through the youth service has increased recently, and is above the national average. However, the proportion of young people gaining an accredited outcome through the youth service has declined, and is lower than the Wales average. The youth service's management reports do not evaluate effectively enough the impact of its work, and therefore it is difficult to identify the overall outcomes for young people involved in the service.

The youth council draws appropriately on a wide range of young people representing schools and colleges as well as particular interest groups such as the LGBT forum and LAC forum. As part of its work, the youth council meets with elected members of the cabinet every three months and petitions councillors effectively on behalf of young people living in Neath Port Talbot. For example, when the council proposed to relocate the Sandfields youth club to the Aberavon Leisure and Fitness Centre, the youth council counter argued successfully that Ysgol Bae Baglan would be a better location.

Quality of education services: Good

Officers in Neath Port Talbot know their schools well. Challenge advisers and teacher development officers work appropriately to monitor and challenge schools according to the level of support identified through the national categorisation system. Challenge advisers' reports provide a detailed evaluation of standards, provision and leadership for each school. However, very few reports evaluate the quality of nursery provision or the progress made by the youngest children through the early years. The quality of pre-inspection reports provided by the authority has improved over the last three years although their judgements on standards, teaching and leadership are generally more positive than inspection outcomes over the same period.

The partnership agreement outlines clearly the respective responsibilities of the authority, governing bodies and schools. Challenge advisers generally identify underperforming schools in a timely fashion. Where appropriate, the authority uses its full statutory powers to good effect. As a result, many underperforming schools have improved aspects of standards, provision and leadership appropriately.

Challenge advisers set purposeful recommendations for schools to consider. They review these suitably at subsequent visits and note any completed actions. They also direct school leaders to professional learning opportunities that support school priorities. These include relevant courses provided by the regional consortium. This is helping school leaders to carry out their roles more effectively.

The authority provides school leaders and governors with a wide range of useful performance data to support self-evaluation. In addition, challenge advisers provide school leaders with useful guidance to strengthen their approaches to self-evaluation and planning for improvement.

The authority has managed governor recruitment well. It supports the skills development of chairs and other governors through effective training.

The authority provides a broad range of support services that promote inclusion and meet the needs of vulnerable learners well. It has restructured its inclusion services so that they focus more clearly on improving the quality of provision for vulnerable learners. School improvement staff and inclusion services staff are beginning to work together well. As a result, schools are better able to meet the needs of pupils with additional learning needs and those at risk of exclusion. Schools and most key stakeholders have a good understanding of the authority's vision for inclusive education. However, the authority does not share this information with parents and carers well enough, for example through its website.

The authority has made beneficial arrangements to build the capacity of mainstream schools to identify and meet pupils' additional learning needs (ALN). ALN cluster meetings are effective in enabling the authority to identify training needs, monitor expenditure and challenge underperformance in areas of provision. The authority has provided a wide range of training opportunities, which are helping to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence of staff working in mainstream and specialist settings.

There are clear arrangements for identifying and assessing the needs of pre-school children with additional learning needs. The newly established transition arrangements for these children from Flying Start childcare settings provide schools with useful information and guidance about the individual needs of each child. Effective joint working between education and health partners ensures that they meet well the complex needs of learners such as those with sensory and speech and language difficulties.

The authority suitably meets its statutory duties in relation to learners with ALN. However, over the last three years it has issued only a minority of statements of SEN within statutory timescales. Despite this, the authority has liaised very closely with parents and carers to reduce the number of appeals to the SEN Tribunal for Wales.

The authority meets the needs of pupils from minority ethnic groups, looked after children and the gypsy and traveller community well. For example, the gypsy traveller service successfully engages learners and their families in education and supports transition to further education, training or employment.

Over the last three years, the authority has changed its approach to the support for wellbeing and behaviour. Overall, officers have worked well with schools to reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions, particularly those of six days or more. The process for managed moves and the permanent exclusion first response meeting are beginning to have a positive impact on reducing the number of permanent exclusions across the authority. The authority provides suitable guidance to schools on the use of pastoral support plans. However, the authority does not monitor the use of these plans well enough.

Changes to education other than at school (EOTAS) provision have been successful in making sure that nearly every pupil accesses a suitable learning pathway in an appropriate setting. However, it is too early to evaluate the impact of these changes on improving outcomes for EOTAS learners.

The authority has a suitable attendance strategy and uses its range of intervention strategies and powers proportionally. The recent appointment of an additional education welfare officer who works directly with pupils who are persistently absent from school has helped to improve these pupils' attendance.

The authority has a clear policy and appropriate procedures for safeguarding learners. The arrangements generally meet requirements. However, inspectors identified a few areas where the authority was not monitoring robustly enough how well its schools and other education services undertake their safeguarding duties. These have been brought to the attention of senior leaders during the inspection.

The authority provides a valuable range of services for families with children who are below statutory school age. For example, Flying Start staff work successfully with families with children under four years of age to deliver programmes that develop parents' skills and provide valuable opportunities for young children to improve their speaking and listening skills and to support their transition to school. Flying Start staff provide schools with useful information about pupils' skills as they enter the nursery classes.

The authority's play strategy is successful in promoting the importance of play with young children. For example, play leaders provide resources that families can borrow to help engage their children in play activities that develop children's social and learning skills.

The authority's plans to re-organise the school estate have been successful in reducing the number of surplus school places. During the past five years, officers and elected members have made suitable decisions that have resulted in new schools opening and the closure and amalgamation of others. Officers have adopted a purposeful strategic approach to the re-organisation programme and their plans ensure that nearly all pupils have places within schools of their choice.

The authority has consulted well on its 2017-2020 Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), and has made clear commitments to improving secondary school provision, for example to establish a Welsh-medium school for pupils aged 3-18 in the north of the County Borough and a 11-16 school in the south. However, the current location of Welsh medium provision across the county means that the Welsh-medium provision is not equally accessible across the authority and consequently pupil transport costs are high. The authority is not sufficiently proactive in assessing the demand for Welsh medium education.

The authority works well with its partners to provide successful educational opportunities for pupils over the age of 16. For example, the 'Seren' programme is helping to raise the aspirations of more able pupils by supporting their applications to the leading universities. Strong links with Neath Port Talbot College ensure that learners access relevant courses that match their needs well.

Officers ensure that there are good opportunities to seek the views of young people across the authority. For example, they have asked pupils for their opinions on new schools and on the quality of playgrounds within their community.

The authority's provision of youth support services has undergone significant changes recently. Consequently, youth services have taken on a more targeted approach to help support vulnerable young people and retain youth work in community-based provision. Officers collect a range of data and information about these activities. However, they do not use it effectively to evaluate what works well or what aspects of the service's provision are less successful.

Leadership and management: Good

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for ensuring effective education provision in Neath Port Talbot. They communicate this vision well with partners and stakeholders across the authority. They have a comprehensive understanding of the key challenges facing the education service and individual schools. Most of the main strengths and areas for improvement identified in this report also feature in the directorate's own self-evaluation.

The leader, chief executive, cabinet member for education and senior officers work closely together to lead services for children and young people well. The corporate plan demonstrates the council's clear commitment to improving education, with one of its three main objectives being 'to improve the wellbeing of children and young people'. The corporate plan reflects relevant national priorities well, including the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and takes good account of the local needs of children and young people.

A comprehensive range of service and team plans support the education directorate plan well. The usefulness of these plans is variable because actions are not always specific enough and resources are not identified well enough. Furthermore, success criteria are often inappropriate or out of date, or feature inconsistent targets across different plans.

The authority has useful systems in place to monitor and evaluate its work and uses a range of beneficial tools to support this. It has good information about learners and education services. However, officers do not consistently evaluate their work well enough, for example when using the authority's report card system.

Senior leaders regularly challenge managers well about identified areas for improvement. This process helps to lessen the impact of any shortcomings in the improvement planning process and ensures that the authority continues to improve its services. The authority has largely addressed the recommendations from its previous inspection in 2010.

Purposeful engagement with partners, based on positive relationships and good communication, is also a feature of leadership within the education service. This contributes to a positive team ethos locally that helps to deliver improvements. For example, strong partnership working with other local authorities and the local health board enables the authority to provide a range of support services to promote learners' wellbeing effectively, particularly learners who are at risk of becoming

disengaged with education. The authority usually seeks, and takes good account of, the views of stakeholders, such as headteachers, parents and external agencies, when reviewing and considering changes or closures to services or schools. In particular, the authority has a well-established culture of listening carefully to, and taking account of, the views of children and young people.

The authority has strengthened scrutiny arrangements and elected members are beginning to use the scrutiny system to challenge officers appropriately. Generally, reports to elected members contain useful information and, in the best examples, include worthwhile evaluations. These support members to recognise what is working well and help them to identify relevant actions for improvement. However, a few reports portray too generous a picture of the quality of provision and standards, such as that of the recent NEETs report. Inquiry panels and working groups appropriately support the Education Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee. These arrangements have increased the number of elected members engaged in scrutiny to look at themes across a range of relevant services. The authority's use of scrutiny includes the review and challenge of policy development, as well as cabinet decisions, and has a suitable forward work programme.

The authority's processes for assessing risk do not identify in enough detail a wide enough range of key education-related risks, such as the arrangements for regional working. Where they do identify risks, the risk register lacks sufficient detail on how the authority will address the risk.

Across the authority, staff show a strong commitment to professional learning in order to update their knowledge and skills in their own areas of responsibility. Leaders routinely identify staff training needs as part of the ongoing performance management procedures. Staff engage positively with a wide range of regional and national networks in order to learn from other authorities, and to share their own good practice. These activities have a positive impact on improving the provision within the authority, and encourage staff to reflect on the quality of their work.

Professional learning matches departments' needs well, for instance in developing behaviour strategies to support inclusion. Leaders provide useful opportunities to develop individuals' skills. These opportunities include ensuring that officers are able to develop their leadership skills and shadow other posts, as part of succession planning. However, the authority lacks an overarching strategy that links professional learning with self-evaluation or the broad aims of the directorate. As a result, leaders are not able to evaluate fully the contribution that officers' professional learning makes to improving outcomes for learners.

The authority has improved the integration between its future financial plan and its corporate planning processes. However, links between individual service plans and the authority's financial plans are still in the process of being developed.

The authority supports its education service well through its budget setting processes, prioritising education wherever possible. The gross school budget for 2017-2018 increased by more than the Welsh average. In addition, the authority has allocated resources well to its strategic priorities, such as the school strategic improvement programme. During 2017-2018, the authority plans to spend more per pupil on education than the Welsh average.

Whilst the school budget delegation rate for 2017-2018 is lower than the Welsh average, this appropriately reflects the centralised delivery of a few areas such as home to school transport and the ALN service.

The authority recognises that a few services have high costs. For example, home to school costs are high in order to ensure that they meet parental preferences in line with local policy. The authority is addressing this high cost by considering different providers and including transport costs within re-organisation discussions.

Budgetary control within the education service is effective. Officers analyse a wide range of data on schools finances well. This analysis, together with regular meetings with headteachers and governors, ensures that they have a good understanding of financial issues within schools.

The authority provides suitable challenge to schools with a deficit budget. They negotiate appropriate short-term recovery plans with these schools. However, this has not been consistently successful in reducing these deficit budgets.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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:

Publication Section
Estyn
Anchor Court, Keen Road
Cardiff
CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

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