



Section 2

Sector summaries: Local government education services

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Context

Local government education services include those provided or commissioned by a single local authority as well as those provided in partnership with other local authorities. School improvement services are provided largely through four regional consortia on behalf of local authorities.

Following two pilot inspections in 2017-2018, we reviewed our processes for inspecting local government education services. As a result of the review, we changed our inspection processes. We removed the judgements for individual inspection areas and replaced these with one overarching judgement on whether the local government education service is causing significant concern or not. We also changed our approach to the inspection areas. Inspectors continue to evaluate and report on all aspects of inspection areas 1 (outcomes) and 3 (leadership and management), but under inspection area 2 (education services) we set local inspection questions that are tailored to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's strategic priorities or result from information that we have about education services in the local authority. We agree the local inspection questions with the local authority prior to the inspection.

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When we judge that a local government education service is causing significant concern, we hold a post-inspection improvement conference around three months after the core inspection. Senior leaders from the local authority and other stakeholders attend the conference, which focuses on the authority's plans to address shortcomings. Following the conference, we will continue to work closely with the local authority to support improvement until we are satisfied with progress against the recommendations in the inspection report.

Between September 2018 and July 2019, we carried out four inspections, in Newport, Bridgend, Flintshire and Powys. We judged that three of the local authorities do not require follow-up activity and that one causes significant concern.

We also visit all local authorities and regional consortia as part of our link inspector arrangements. These visits review progress against the recommendations of previous inspections and thematic reviews, as well as following up on key priorities in the sector. We undertook a more substantial link inspector visit to the ERW region (south-west and mid Wales) during this year due to concerns about the lack of progress since the previous monitoring visit. ERW planned significant changes to their workforce and approach from September 2019, and we continue to monitor ERW's progress. The findings from all these inspections and visits have informed this report.

Outcomes

Across the local authorities, many pupils make sound progress between the statutory school ages 5 to 16. Performance is generally stronger in primary schools than in secondary schools. Three of the four local authorities inspected this year have a recommendation about improving pupil performance in secondary schools. In Bridgend, pupils' standards at the end of key stage 4 are good. However, the proportion of primary schools that have at least good standards when inspected is below the average for Wales and inspectors have often noted weaknesses in pupils' literacy skills in these schools. In two of the local authorities inspected, pupils eligible for free school meals perform at least as well as the same group of pupils across Wales. However, in Newport, the performance of these pupils is weaker. Pupils in Newport who receive continuous support from the Gwent Education Minority-ethnic Service (GEMS) over a period of years perform well at the end of their statutory education. We asked officers from Newport to produce a case study about this work.

Pupils' attendance in primary schools is good in three of the four local authorities. Attendance of pupils in secondary schools is good in Bridgend but is weaker in the other three authorities. In Flintshire, the attendance of pupils in both primary and secondary schools does not compare well with levels in similar local authorities. In two of the local authorities inspected, the percentage of pupils who are persistently absent from school has been above the Wales average for the past three years (Welsh Government, 2019a).

The rate of permanent and fixed-term exclusions is too high in all the local authorities inspected this year.

Newport GEMS

Pupils who receive support from GEMS perform well at key stage 4 in the key indicators that include English/Welsh and mathematics. They achieve to a standard comparable with that of other pupils. The service helps pupils to develop their language skills rapidly through, for example, support from bilingual teaching assistants.

For more information, please read our [report](#)



Bridgend County Borough Council

Across the local authority, children and young people make a very positive contribution to influencing decisions that affect them made by their schools and the local authorities. Young people know that their contribution is valued and makes a difference.

For more information, please read our [case study](#)



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In two of the four local authorities inspected, children and young people have good opportunities to influence decisions that affect them. For example, in Flintshire, young people worked with research officers from Cardiff University to analyse information from the Schools Health Research Network survey. They identified common issues about the health and wellbeing of pupils in secondary schools. This work has resulted in the development of a comprehensive local authority action plan to improve the health and wellbeing of young people in Flintshire. There is more information about this survey and the wellbeing of pupils in Wales in our thematic survey [Healthy and Happy](#), published in June 2019 (Estyn, 2019b). In Bridgend, the youth council has taken the lead in addressing 'period poverty' in schools. As a result of this work, free sanitary products were made available to all schools.

In Newport and Powys, opportunities for pupils to contribute to the strategic direction of the local authority or to help to evaluate the initiatives offered to them are underdeveloped.

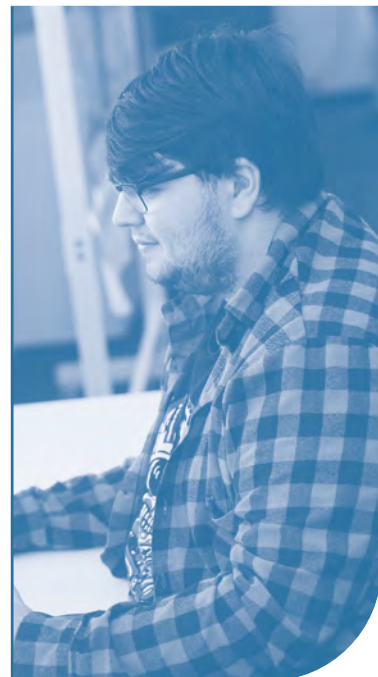
Education services

School improvement officers and challenge advisers generally know their schools well. The partnership between local authority school improvement officers and officers from the regional consortia are effective and officers work well together to provide support to schools. Officers develop good working relationships with schools. For example, the 'Team Bridgend' approach introduced in 2017 supports collaborative working between schools and the local authority well. This approach has helped to establish a collective responsibility for improving outcomes for all learners. Local authority officers in the local authorities inspected this year have improved the use they make of their statutory powers, for example by issuing warning notices to schools that need to improve.

In all four local authorities, challenge advisers have strengthened the support that they provide to schools. They carry out a good range of activities to gather first hand evidence about how well pupils perform, including lesson observations, learning walks and looking at pupils' books. However, the evaluations that officers and advisers make in order to judge progress often focus too heavily on performance data and provision rather than the standards that pupils achieve or the progress that they make.

The work that local authority officers and challenge advisers carry out does not always ensure that schools causing concern improve quickly enough. A few schools in all local authorities inspected this year either remain in statutory categories following inspection for too long or do not sustain improvements following a period of intensive support. As a result, outcomes and provision for pupils in these schools remain weak over time.

Local authorities generally use the resources available to them well to increase the levels of support that they provide for pupils with special educational needs and other pupils who require extra support. For example, they use the skills and expertise of teachers from PRUs and special schools to work with teachers and pupils in mainstream schools.



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Bridgend local authority focuses well on supporting young carers in its schools. The vulnerable groups' team has established good working relationships with the children's social care service to provide training and support to the schools that young carers attend. In May 2019, we published a survey on the provision for young carers in secondary schools, further education colleges and PRUs across Wales (Estyn, 2019d). For more information please read the [report](#).

In Flintshire, the local authority provides good quality provision for pupils with special educational needs. The service is well resourced and its staff have significant expertise and experience. They provide clear and helpful guidance to schools to help them identify pupils' needs and secure relevant support. A notable feature of Flintshire's work is its strong early identification and intervention to support children's speech, language and communication skills. We asked the local authority to provide a case study outlining their work in this area.

In Powys, there is inadequate co ordination, evaluation and planning for pupils with special educational needs or those who require extra support. Provision for groups of vulnerable learners is too variable and the local authority's vision for pupils needing support is not communicated effectively to schools. Officers do not have a comprehensive overview of the needs of pupils and this limits their ability to meet the needs of vulnerable learners effectively.

In Newport, provision to support the wellbeing of children and young people is a high priority. The local authority monitors well the provision that schools make to improve pupils' wellbeing through its school wellbeing tracker. This enables officers to identify and share strong practice in schools. Officers know their school communities well and provide bespoke support to vulnerable pupils through a range of initiatives. For example, the 'see the world through our eyes' project has helped to promote inclusion through introducing pupils to the features of different cultures including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. In April 2019, we produced a survey about the provision that schools and local authorities make for secondary school-aged Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils (Estyn, 2019c). For more information please read the [report](#).

Leadership and management

In all four local authorities, senior leaders have a clear vision for education. In three of the four authorities, this vision informs corporate planning well. However, in Powys local authority, significant change of senior officers, including at chief executive, director and head of service levels, has affected the impact of leadership on key areas of the local authority's work.

Local authorities have good working relationships with their regional consortium. Officers generally contribute well to the management, governance and scrutiny of their consortium. Local authority and consortia officers share information about schools frequently to ensure that there is a shared understanding of school performance and that relevant support is provided.

Flintshire County Council

The Language Development Project enables well-resourced and effective universal, targeted and specialist support for younger pupils. The authority's language development assistants attend schools and work collaboratively with teachers to support individuals and small groups of pupils. In addition, the English as an additional language (EAL) service and the Language and Communication service deliver valuable training to teachers about early language acquisition. .

For more information, please read our [case study](#)



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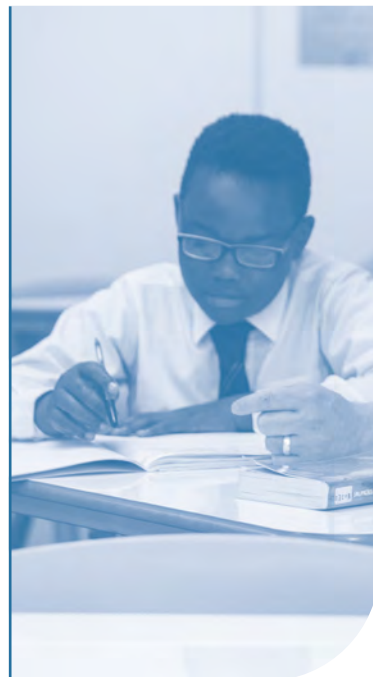
Improvement planning processes generally identify appropriately the most important aspects of education that need to improve. In most cases, these priorities provide a sound base for improving education at corporate and service level. Local authorities have, in the main, made appropriate progress in addressing their priorities and securing improvement. However, in Newport, although officers have been able to sustain good outcomes in primary schools and strong leadership of GEMS, they have not had enough impact on improving outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals or for pupils in the PRU. In Powys, leaders have not made strong, sustainable improvements to address many of the shortcomings identified during previous Estyn inspections or in Wales Audit Office reports.

Self-evaluation processes at corporate level are well established in three local authorities. In the best instances, officers take good account of contributions from stakeholders, including school leaders and pupils, to help them evaluate their services. This helps to ensure that officers and elected members have an accurate understanding of the education service's performance. However, there is variability in the quality of the evaluation of the work of specific education services in all of the local authorities inspected this year. These are not rigorous enough, do not always provide senior managers with the full impact of the services provided, or focus too much on headline data. In Powys, the local authority does not have a robust and ongoing self-evaluation process for its education service. Recently, senior leaders have developed a better understanding of the main issues facing the local authority, and elected members are beginning to challenge performance more effectively.

In three of the local authorities, scrutiny arrangements are well run and elected members are increasingly robust in monitoring and challenging progress and supporting decision-making in key areas. Powys local authority has been slow to develop its scrutiny arrangements and until very recently challenge has been weak.

Generally, the local authorities have suitable policies and procedures in relation to school re-organisation. Powys leaders, despite making modest progress in re organising primary schools through federation processes, have made very little progress in addressing the challenges of post-16 education. In July 2019, we published a report on the common features of effective federation (Estyn, 2019a). For further information please read the [report](#).

All local authorities show commitment to increasing Welsh-medium provision through their Welsh in Education Strategic Plans. Progress in delivering the plans in three of the four local authorities has been slow or not strategic enough. Officers in Flintshire have responded well to an identified need to expand Welsh-medium education, and advisory and early years teams provide effective bespoke support to develop pupils' Welsh language skills from a very early age.



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Staff in the education services of all local authorities take part in a range of useful professional learning opportunities to support and develop their work. In three of the four local authorities, these opportunities are planned as part of the corporate performance management framework and annual appraisal processes. Managers identify the individual strengths and learning needs of staff and link learning opportunities well to corporate priorities. In Powys local authority, very few education service staff have undertaken courses linked to a leadership pathway. As a result, there are limited opportunities for leadership succession planning within the service.

In three of the four local authorities, officers and elected members plan annual budgets carefully and in accordance with priorities. They respond appropriately to key pressures within the education budget and allocate resources to reflect the high priority placed on improving education outcomes. In Newport, officers take a proactive approach in seeking internal and external funding to deliver priorities, for example to improve school buildings and support minority ethnic pupils. However, in Powys and Flintshire authorities, financial management has not been robust enough to ensure that schools with deficit budgets reduce these within appropriate timescales.