Quality and standards in education and training in Wales

A report on the quality of

Blaenau Gwent Local Authority Education Services

October 2008

by

Estyn, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales
The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities (LAs);
- primary schools;
- secondary schools;
- special schools;
- pupil referral units;
- independent schools;
- further education;
- adult community-based learning;
- youth support services;
- youth and community work training;
- LAs;
- teacher education and training;
- work-based learning;
- careers companies;
- offender learning; and
- the education, guidance and training elements of the Department for Work and Pensions funded training programme.

Estyn also:

- provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others; and
- makes public good practice based on inspection evidence.

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The inspection

1 Local Education Authority (LEA) service inspections are carried out under section 38 of the Education Act 1997 and the Children Act 2004. The inspection framework for this cycle is on the Estyn website www.estyn.co.uk.

2 This inspection took place from 13 October 2008 to 24 October 2008. The focus of this inspection is on strategic management, social inclusion, additional learning needs and access. Before the inspection, the Education Service undertook a review of the services it provides and produced a self evaluation report as part of its own review process.

Key judgements

3 The inspection team makes two key judgements about each service. These are:

(1) How good is the local authority’s performance?

4 The local authority’s performance in discharging its responsibilities is rated on a four-point scale as follows:

   Grade 1  good with outstanding features
   Grade 2  good features and no important shortcomings
   Grade 3  good features outweigh shortcomings
   Grade 4  shortcomings in important areas

(2) Will the local authority’s performance improve?

5 The prospects of improvement are rated on a four-point scale as follows:

   Grade 1  improvement prospects are good, with significant improvements already in place
   Grade 2  improvement prospects are good, with no major barriers
   Grade 3  some good prospects, but barriers in important areas
   Grade 4  many important barriers to improvement
Key questions

6 In order to make the two key judgements, inspectors evaluate the authority’s performance in relation to each of four key questions:

- How effective is the authority’s strategic planning?
- How effective are the authority’s services?
- How effective are leadership and management?
- How well do leaders and managers monitor, evaluate and improve services?

7 These four key questions and the evaluations are set out in the findings section. They are recorded as grades, using the four-point scales set out at (1) and (2) above. All of the grades are included in the grading profile.

8 Estyn’s reports follow its guidance for the writing and editing of reports, which is available on the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.uk). The table below shows the terms that Estyn uses and a broad idea of their meaning. The table is for guidance only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nearly all</td>
<td>with very few exceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>90% or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many</td>
<td>70% or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A majority</td>
<td>over 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half/around half</td>
<td>close to 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A minority</td>
<td>below 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few</td>
<td>below 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very few</td>
<td>less than 10%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A report on the quality of Blaenau Gwent Local Authority Education Services
October 2008

Background to the authority

9 Three distinctive valleys in South-East Wales make up Blaenau Gwent County Borough. Blaenau Gwent contains four main towns, which are Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Brynmawr and Abertillery. The largest of these is Ebbw Vale. Historically, the heavy industries of steel manufacture and coal mining dominated the area. However, with the demise of these industries, the area has experienced high rates of unemployment and a high incidence of social deprivation. The overall current level of pupils entitled to free school meals is 22%1.

10 There are 16 political wards in Blaenau Gwent represented by 42 elected councillors. All but three wards are among the 100 most deprived2 in Wales and the whole of the county borough has been designated as an Objective One3 Priority Regeneration Area.

11 Regeneration schemes for the area include the re-opening of the railway from Cardiff to Ebbw Vale, the establishment of the Heads of the Valleys strategy and the redevelopment of the former steelworks site in Ebbw Vale. The last includes new plans for establishing a learning campus to provide a range of post-16 education and training on a single site.

12 Blaenau Gwent is the third smallest unitary authority in Wales and has a decreasing population. According to Welsh Assembly Government statistics (SB 46/2008), Blaenau Gwent has a population of 69,200. Between 1998 and 2002, the population decreased by 19%. Less than 1% of the population are from minority ethnic groups and 7% are Welsh speakers.

Political governance

13 Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (CBC) comprises 42 elected members representing 16 wards. The political composition is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Voice</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Aligned</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14 Members of the first four groups listed above make up the Partnership Group, which is the current ruling administration in Blaenau Gwent. The 16 Labour members form the opposition.

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1 Source: Schools in Wales: General Statistics 2007 - Published December 2007, Welsh Assembly Government
2 This is calculated using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, published by the Local Government Data Unit-Wales.
3 The Objective 1 Programme aims to increase the growth and prosperity of economies that are currently lagging behind the European average.
15 The executive is the main decision making body and comprises the leader and eight executive members, each with portfolio responsibility. The executive member for education is responsible for education matters.

16 The education and leisure scrutiny committee monitors education related policy, challenges performance and improvement planning, and recommends further developments.

Corporate structure

17 The council organises service provision into four service areas. These are resources, business development, environment and community services, each headed by a corporate director. Education is within the community services directorate.

18 The education service structure comprises the:

- Chief Education Officer;
- Assistant Director, School Services;
- Assistant Director, Children and Young People;
- Chief School Improvement Officer;
- Chief Education Psychologist;
- Principal Adviser for Inclusion; and the
- Head of School Support Services.

Schools and pupils in the authority

19 There are 28 primary schools and six secondary schools. All of the primary schools cater for pupils aged 3-11. One primary school provides education through the medium of Welsh. Older pupils attend the Welsh-medium secondary school in a neighbouring county. Altogether, approximately 5.7% of primary school children and 3.8% of secondary age pupils receive their education through the medium of Welsh. There is also one special school (Penycwm) and a portfolio pupil referral unit (Proteus). There are 6,207 pupils in primary schools and 4,716 pupils attend secondary schools.

Funding

20 The Welsh Assembly Government’s 2008-2009 standard spending assessment (SSA) per head of population for Blaenau Gwent CBC is the highest for local authorities in Wales. Within this, the education component (the education

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4 SSA is the means by which the Welsh Assembly Government distributes Revenue Support Grant to local authorities.
indicator-based assessment (IBA)\(^5\) amounts to £50.3 million. This represents an average of £4,807 for each pupil, which is the fourth highest level of education IBA per pupil in Wales. The level of the education IBA reflects the indicators that contribute to the allocation formula, including deprivation and sparsity.

21 The council has set overall budgets for 2008-2009 for managing and delivering its services at a level 3.6% above the SSA. The net education budget\(^6\) for 2008-2009 was set at a level representing 100.6% of the education IBA. This provided a total net education revenue budget per pupil in of £4,838, third highest of the 22 councils in Wales.

22 The council has invested about £32.4 million in capital expenditure on education over the four years to 2007/2008. This represents about £2840 per pupil, the highest in all authorities in Wales.

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\(^5\) Education IBA is that part of SSA relating to the delivery of education services. Education IBA is not intended as a spending target, and councils are free to spend at levels above or below IBA, in accordance with their priorities.

\(^6\) The net education budget excludes income from specific grants.
Summary

Grade profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How good is the local authority's performance?</th>
<th>Will the local authority's performance improve?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional learning needs (ALN)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategic management

23 The children and young people’s plan (CYPP) sets out a clear vision for the future development of education services in Blaenau Gwent. It links well with other strategic plans such as the community plan and the health, social care and wellbeing strategy.

24 Strategic leadership is good. Senior officers have a clear knowledge and understanding of education matters.

25 Consultation with and participation of children and young people, both on the CYPP and in other areas is outstanding.

26 There are good working relationships with a range of partners such as health, social services and the police. These have contributed to the good quality of plans such as the CYPP and the health, social care and wellbeing strategy.

27 Partnership working with schools is not always effective enough. In particular, lack of agreement with secondary schools on the proposals for 14-19 education has delayed developments in this area. The council has not always involved schools well enough in the development of some plans, for example the inclusion strategy.

28 The council’s performance management system overall is good. There are generally clear links to performance indicators, risks and outcomes.

29 Members are beginning to challenge officers regarding the performance of services and schools. This challenge is not yet consistent or robust enough.

30 It is a significant shortcoming, however, that the council has been slow in implementing recommendations from a previous Estyn inspection report.

31 The current political administration has only been in place since May 2008 and its ability to deliver the changes needed is as yet untested.
Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing

32 The council is effective as a corporate parent and ensures that children looked after by it receive their entitlement to education and achieve good standards. In particular it gives good support for teenage parents and Gypsy Traveller pupils.

33 There is good work in child protection. The Local Safeguarding Childrens’ Board has improved co-operation between education and social services.

34 Support for school attendance is good. Attendance is in line with the Welsh average. Education Welfare Officers work well with schools and there is a range of initiatives to support attendance.

35 Standards of behaviour in schools are generally good. For the past three years, rates of permanent exclusion have been low and below the average for Wales. However, there is no overall local council strategy to improve pupil behaviour.

36 Secondary pupils who display challenging behaviour receive good provision via the Oasis project, which is staffed by school-based social workers.

37 The Proteus project co-ordinates provision for excluded pupils and those at risk of exclusion. Estyn inspected the Proteus project in April 2008 and found it to be in need of ‘significant improvement’ in spite of being innovative.

38 Although rates of permanent exclusion are low and below the average for Wales, the authority has not been successful in ensuring that all permanently excluded pupils take up their statutory weekly entitlement of 25 hours of tuition.

Additional learning needs (ALN)

39 At present, there is no agreed and co-ordinated inclusion strategy to link additional learning needs, social inclusion, children’s services and school improvement.

40 The council provides good quality advice and support for children and young people with additional learning needs.

41 The council has good mechanisms in place to collect data on the provision made for pupils with ALN. Although the service is data rich, it does not use this data consistently enough to challenge school practice in ALN provision. The council does not strategically evaluate outcomes for children and young people who have ALN well enough.

42 Co-ordination of the education psychology service (EPS) and ALN in the early years is good and ensures effective service delivery. In the other key stages, the coordination is not as good and headteachers, SENCOs, parents and carers are unclear about service priorities and the resources available.

43 The council has generally made slow progress against a few of the recommendations in response to shortcomings identified in the last inspection of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in 2001.
Access

44 The council has appropriately reduced the number of primary schools since 1996 from 38 to 24 and has developed all primary schools as 3-11 age range schools. Despite the reduction in the number of primary schools, Blaenau Gwent still has high numbers of surplus places in both its primary and secondary schools.

45 The council has been slow to address secondary school reorganisation needs and there have been delays in progressing the Learning Campus Project, through which the council intends to deliver all post-16 learning in Blaenau Gwent from a single site.

46 The council has invested significantly in its primary school buildings. It has ensured that new school buildings are built to suitable standards and generally to time.

47 The schools asset management plan is good. The council has reliable systems that ensure that they make decisions about school buildings that are based on accurate and up-to-date information. Officers have prepared a good quality “way-forward” document for consideration by the Executive committee. However, the council does not yet have a member-approved strategy and plans for addressing further school organisational changes including the issue of surplus school places and the need to further improve school buildings.

48 There are effective arrangements for the management of admissions. Admissions criteria are clear and they are followed consistently.

49 The home-to-school transport service is good and works well with schools.

50 There are effective arrangements for the management of access to early years provision.
In order to secure improvements, the council should:

R1 produce an agreed and co-ordinated inclusion strategy that:
- links ALN, social inclusion, children’s services and school improvement; and
- co-ordinates the range of services that contribute to behaviour management.

R2 use pupil data to effectively challenge schools and improve outcomes for children and young people with ALN;

R3 increase the number of excluded pupils who take up their statutory entitlement to tuition;

R4 produce a strategy that will:
- reduce surplus places in primary and secondary schools;
- manage the financial and curricular implications of falling pupil numbers in the secondary sector, including sixth form provision; and
- further improve the suitability and quality of school buildings; and

R5 ensure that it addresses recommendations from Estyn inspections.
Findings

How good is the LA’s performance?

Strategic management
Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

Strategic planning

52 The children and young people’s plan (CYPP) sets out a clear vision for the future development of education services in Blaenau Gwent. It links well with other strategic plans such as the community plan and the health, social care and wellbeing strategy. In producing the plan, the council has consulted well with all appropriate partners including schools.

53 The participation of children and young people in consultation, both on the CYPP and in other areas, is outstanding.

Elected members and managers consult well with, and involve children and young people in discussion. Examples of this include the involvement of young people on the council’s scrutiny committee, in the position of youth mayor, as representatives on committees such as the National Eisteddfod of Wales planning group, and in consulting with very young children through play, and through work with the children’s grand council.

Elected members and managers have supported many young people including schools’ councils, the youth forum and those on representative groups. Members have also provided opportunities and financial support to young people to attend and address national and international conferences and events, such as the TUC, and the Paralympic Games in China.

Young people have therefore been able to play a part in shaping services and priorities. They feel that their voice is valued in Blaenau Gwent and their capacity to make improvements to the day-to-day life of young people across the county has improved significantly.

54 Financial planning and the processes for prioritising resources are satisfactory. For 2008-2009, the council gave a high priority to education and budgeted to spend at 100.6% of the indicator-based assessment (IBA) for education.

Leadership

55 Strategic leadership is good. Senior officers have a clear knowledge and understanding of education matters within the council.

56 Elected members have a good understanding and knowledge of education matters. They are developing good relations with schools.

\(^7\) This has representatives from all primary schools and provides input into education plans.
Partnership

57 There are good working relationships with a range of partners such as health, social services and the police. These have contributed to the good quality of plans such as the CYPP and the health, social care and wellbeing strategy.

58 Partnership working with schools is not always effective enough. In particular, lack of agreement with secondary schools on the proposals for 14-19 education has delayed developments. The council has not always involved schools well enough in the development of some plans such as the inclusion strategy.

Performance management

59 The council’s performance management system overall is good. There are generally clear links to performance indicators, risks and outcomes. There is a good quarterly monitoring system at a strategic level and good links to the joint risk assessment. This ensures that the council has clarity in the key strategic priorities for education. However, there are weaknesses in planning at service level, where monitoring against outcomes is not always robust enough. A minority of officers at this level measure processes rather than the outcomes for learners or groups of learners. This is inappropriate.

60 Apart from ALN, the council’s self-evaluation report is comprehensive and broadly accurate. It produced the report through the involvement of many officers and stakeholders. The report provides a balanced picture of strengths and areas for development within the education service.

61 Officers regularly provide elected members with good, clear information. This takes place through a range of methods, including briefing papers, external consultants’ reports, case studies, and reports of progress against action plans. Members are beginning to challenge officers about the performance of services and schools. This however is not yet consistent or robust enough.

62 The council engages well with external regulators such as the Wales Audit Office and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales. The council meets with its regulators on a monthly basis to review progress and on a quarterly basis to update the joint risk assessment. These meetings are well attended by the chief education officer, corporate directors, the leader and deputy leader of the council, and others as appropriate.

63 It is a significant shortcoming, however, that the council has been slow in implementing recommendations from the previous Estyn inspection report of special educational needs in 2001.

Promoting social inclusion wellbeing
Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

64 Blaenau Gwent, despite its high level of deprivation, is in the second or third quartile for measures of inclusion, such as attendance, exclusions and the number of young people aged 16-18 not in employment, education or training (NEET). The important
shortcomings leading to the Grade 3 judgement are the lack of coordination of behaviour support services and the fact that Proteus, the pupil referral unit, is in need of ‘significant improvement’.

65 Below is an example of a good, innovative project that is delivered through inter-agency working to benefit teenage parents.

**Teenage parent project**

Agencies such as health, education, social services and schools work very well together to share resources, plan a curriculum, and deliver flexible provision for teenage parents.

Managers provide a crèche facility for the children of those attending school, the Integrated Children’s Centre or home tuition. This means that young parents are given a very good range of options to continue to access education. There is a good range of Open College Network (OCN) qualifications available in, for example, first aid, parenting skills or retail. In addition, tutors give the young people good access to information to improve their life skills, such as budgeting, preparation for the world of work and healthy eating.

All learners involved in the project are making very good and rapid progress in, for example, the OCN course on sexual health.

**Meeting statutory duties and the needs of specific groups of pupils and young people**

66 Officers of the council work increasingly well together to ensure that looked after children receive their entitlement both in educational support and in health and leisure services. The council monitors the achievements of looked after children well.

67 The council takes a lead role in the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board (LSCB). The Child Protection Officer is also the Chief Educational Psychologist. An officer who works in both education and social services co-ordinates the LSCB. This contributes to good partnership working between the two services.

68 The council has not monitored the support provided to minority ethnic pupils well enough. The Gwent education minority ethnic service (GEMS) provides support via a service level agreement. Officers do not effectively monitor the quality of the support provided. Communication and consultation between GEMS, schools and the local authority has been poor. Numbers of minority ethnic pupils needing support have risen in the past year but GEMS has reduced the amount of support it provides without sufficient consultation with schools or the council.

69 The council has used the consultation framework of the youth forum well to highlight bullying in schools. The education psychology service has produced good materials and delivered good training on homophobic bullying. The training has been effective in challenging teachers’ attitudes to bullying and in empowering them to confront it.
70 Services provided for the Gypsy Traveller community are good. The council does good outreach work and the children stay at school for longer than in many other authorities.

Support for attendance at school

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>UA (^8)</td>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>UA (^8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>93.1%</td>
<td>92.5%</td>
<td>93.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>UA (^8)</td>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>UA (^8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>90.6%</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

71 Attendance levels in Blaenau Gwent have remained almost constant over the past three years. Primary school attendance is slightly below the average for Wales but rates of unauthorised absence are better than the national average. In secondary schools, the overall attendance levels and rate of unauthorised absence are better than can be expected given the higher than average levels of deprivation. The attendance strategy and the attendance and punctuality policy are both effective in ensuring that attendance remains above the expected level.

72 School-based education welfare officers work well with pupils, parents and school staff and provide good quality support and guidance to schools. The council analyses attendance data well and schools are challenged when targets to reduce absences are not met. Good referral systems enable attendance support to be targeted according to need.

73 The council’s attendance project gives good support to Year 11 pupils with very poor attendance. The project has a good success rate in preventing these pupils from becoming disengaged from education or training. Learners gain a variety of qualifications including OCN qualifications and basic skills awards.

Support for behaviour in schools

74 Standards of behaviour in schools are generally good. For the past three years, rates of permanent exclusion have been low and below the average for Wales. However, the authority has not been successful in ensuring that all permanently excluded pupils take up their statutory weekly entitlement of 25 hours of tuition.

Permanent and fixed term exclusions from secondary schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent exclusions. Rate per 1,000 pupils (Secondary pupils only)</th>
<th>2004-2005</th>
<th>2005-2006</th>
<th>2006-2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^8\) Unauthorised absence
Fixed term exclusions of five days or fewer.  
Rate per 1,000 pupils  
(Secondary pupils only)  

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<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fixed term exclusions of six days or more.  
Rate per 1,000 pupils  
(Secondary pupils only)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the past three years, rates of fixed term exclusions from secondary schools have been high, and there has been a significant increase in the number of primary school pupils excluded for between one and five days.  Fixed term exclusions of six days or more from secondary schools have been higher than the Welsh average over the past three years despite showing a decrease in 2006-2007.

Educational psychologists provide good advice and support for behaviour management in primary and secondary schools but there is no overall strategy to improve pupil behaviour nor a designated lead officer with a responsibility for this area.  This results in a lack of consistency of the quality of support for schools and is most evident in primary schools.

Training provided by the educational psychology service has enabled teachers and learning support assistants to generally deal effectively with behaviour problems in schools.  Members of the advisory team work well with children whose behavioural needs have been identified and give good advice on behaviour management to primary schools.

Secondary pupils who display challenging behaviour receive good provision via the Oasis project, which is staffed by school-based youth workers.  Schools value the service greatly.  It enables many pupils to remain within a mainstream school setting.  School-based joint liaison panels work well in identifying needs and organising provision for pupils at risk of exclusion.

The Proteus project co-ordinates provision for excluded pupils and those at risk of exclusion.  It offers an alternative curriculum for some pupils under a dual registration arrangement with schools as well as provision for pupils not at school.  Estyn inspected the Proteus project in April 2008 and found it to be in need of ‘significant improvement’ in spite of being innovative.

Additional learning needs (ALN)  
Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

At present, there is no agreed and co-ordinated inclusion strategy to link ALN, social inclusion, children's services and school improvement.  This means that working practices are not of a consistently good quality.  Schools are not fully aware of the provision that is available to them.
Meeting statutory duties

81 The council provides good quality advice and support for children and young people with ALN. Generally, pupils in all age ranges make good progress in standards, learning and behaviour.

82 The council meets the statutory requirements of the SEN and Disability Act (2001), and is making good progress in ensuring that schools are accessible for disabled children and young people.

83 The quality of statements and annual review documents is good and information for parents and schools is generally clear. Assessments and statements of SEN are appropriately detailed and clearly specify pupils’ needs, educational objectives and provision. Officers rigorously monitor the progress of all pupils with statements of SEN, giving particular priority to pupils moving between key stages and to those placed out-of-county. Officers complete annual reviews efficiently. However, the proportion of statements produced within statutory time limits is the lowest in Wales. This was a shortcoming in the 2001 inspection of SEN and still has not been addressed.

Provision for pupils with ALN

84 Specialist teams within the education service and regional partners provide good support for individual children, their families and their schools. These teams work closely with key external agencies to raise standards and promote the successful inclusion of pupils with hearing, vision, medical, communication, learning and behavioural needs.

85 Individual educational psychologists provide a good range of advice and support to their schools. However, this has not been communicated effectively to schools. As a result, schools are not aware of what the service as a whole can provide for them. The educational psychology service has taken a lead role in developing effective partnership working with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Access to effective multi-agency support for children with a range of needs, including mental health needs and emotional and behavioural difficulties is improving although there are still a number of pupils waiting for support.

86 There are good arrangements for identifying and assessing the needs of pre-school children and for providing early support in partnership with local child health services. Consultation with children and families on early years’ interventions is very good, focusing on needs assessment, planning, prioritisation and implementation.

The senior education psychologist, the early years co-ordinator and other officers work effectively together. They co-ordinate early interventions well to address the ALN of pupils under four years old. Decisions are clearly communicated and understood by all partners. There are clear terms of reference, training, systems and processes. All early years partners have a good understanding of the SEN Code of Practice. There is evidence that early identification and effective partnership provision is resulting in more and better support for an increased number of children and families.
The Monitoring Assessment, Additional Provision and Placement Group (MAAPP) monitors provision and specialist placements well. They assess requests for statements and recommendations for additional provision and placements. In addition, Education services, Social Services and Health representatives consider very specialised and/or complex cases that might require funding contributions by more than one service.

The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational need at 3.2% is close to the Welsh average of 3.1%. The council educates a relatively high proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) in special classes or units in mainstream schools, and a correspondingly low proportion in ordinary classes in mainstream schools. The authority has planned to reduce statements and has been successful in doing so. The number of statements issued has been reduced from 485 in 2004-2005 to 354 in 2007-2008. The school placement of pupils with statements of SEN in January 2008 was as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School placement</th>
<th>Percentage (Blaenau Gwent)</th>
<th>Percentage (Wales)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream schools (ordinary classes)</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream schools (special classes or units)</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintained special schools</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent schools (including non-maintained)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil referral units/other than at school</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are several good initiatives aimed at promoting the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. The Specific Learning Difficulties (SPLD) service works closely with a large number of children and staff in primary schools to improve reading. The skills of secondary school staff in supporting reading across the curriculum are also being developed appropriately. Outcomes are carefully evaluated. They show that pupils make good progress.

The ‘Unlocking the Potential’ project is effectively helping mainstream primary and secondary schools to improve the standards of achievement of less able pupils. This project uses the expertise of staff in the council’s special school to develop mainstream schools’ capacity to work with pupils with speech and language difficulties.

Specialist teachers and educational psychologists provide special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) with good training and support. There are effective relationships between SENCOs and officers to help make the most of resources to benefit pupils with additional learning needs.

The council benefits from regional collaboration for provision for pupils with hearing and visual impairment. This provision is of very good quality.
93 Speech, language and communication provision is inadequate and often not very accessible. Well-developed plans are now in place to develop regional provision to fill the gap in provision and meet learners’ need.

94 There is a satisfactory range of provision available to pupils for social, emotional and behaviour difficulties. However, this is not co-ordinated or communicated effectively enough. As a result, headteachers are not aware of what the authority can offer as a whole.

95 The very low rate of appeal to the SEN Tribunal for Wales over the last four years indicates that the council is successful in negotiating with most parents and reaching agreement about the most appropriate provision for their children. There are appropriate arrangements in place for parents and carers to provide the council with feedback about support packages and that feedback is positive. However, a few children and parents are not properly supported during transition between different settings and phases of education.

96 Access to specialist support through the medium of Welsh is not readily available.

Data for pupils with SEN

SENCOs and senior managers in the council have worked together to improve the accuracy and value of information entered into the PLASC record for pupils with SEN. The council is developing a comprehensive record of the provision made for pupils with SEN, and is beginning to link this to the progress that they make. Following a successful pilot study early in 2006, SENCOs are continuing to record the provision made for pupils with SEN, using the proposed new PLASC categories of curriculum and teaching; grouping and support; specialised resources; and advice and assessment. In addition, SENCOs and officers have developed a 5-point scale to describe the progress that pupils with SEN make in relation to key targets in their individual education plans.

97 This evaluation of outcomes at service level demonstrates the impact of the good work of the ALN services. As a result, the council knows, at service level, the costs and impact of particular types of provision relative to the level of need. However, this information is not consistently used by individual schools to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of provision.

98 Regional service level agreements (SLAs) and provision are not being monitored or evaluated effectively enough. For example, the council does not know if it is getting value for money from the GEMS service that it purchases under a SLA.

Access
Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

Provision of school places

99 The council has taken appropriate action in the past to reduce the number of primary schools. Since 1996, it has reduced the number of primary schools from 38 to 24 and has developed all primary schools as 3-11 age range schools. Despite this reduction in the number of schools, Blaenau Gwent still has over 18% surplus places in primary schools, with a significant number of surplus places at 14 of them.
There are over 18% surplus places in secondary schools with a significant number of surplus places at two of them. The council has been slow to address the need for secondary school reorganisation.

Blaenau Gwent has reliable school places information systems. Pupil forecasting is generally accurate and there is a commitment to annual updating of school sufficiency, suitability and condition data. The council’s pupil number projections indicate that Blaenau Gwent’s surplus places position is going to worsen.

The council recognises that its sixth forms are too small and is progressing, in partnership with Coleg Gwent and the Welsh Assembly Government, a Learning Campus Project. Through the project, the council intends to deliver all post-16 learning in Blaenau Gwent from one campus. The project seeks to be a beacon development and a major catalyst in the regeneration of Ebbw Vale following the closure of the steelworks. However, the Learning Campus Project has been delayed due to concerns regarding governance raised by headteachers.

The council has identified the need to ensure that its overall school organisation planning also addresses future Welsh-medium demands and those specific requirements related to special educational needs and disabled access.

The council has made good progress in identifying the main challenges it faces in respect of surplus places and school reorganisation. There is evidence of strong senior officer leadership, which has led to a wide understanding of these challenges and a significant level of support and commitment to the need for further school reorganisation. Effective project management arrangements support the implementation of the school organisation and investment agenda.

Officers have prepared a good quality “way-forward” document for consideration by the Executive committee. However, the council does not yet have a member-approved strategy and plans for addressing further school organisational changes, including the need to reduce the number of surplus school places and the need to further improve school buildings.

Asset management planning

The schools asset management plan is good. The council has reliable information systems. These ensure that decisions are based on accurate and up-to-date information. The schools asset management plan includes an evaluation of the educational implications of new and refurbished buildings.

The council has a clear commitment to develop its schools as being community-focused. The effectiveness of the development of schools in this context will be influenced by the standard of the development plans of other service areas of the council. Whilst school asset management planning is good, asset management planning in other council services is less well advanced. Some recent school development projects have successfully included community needs and good corporate project management may help ensure that schools are developed in a community-focused context.
The council has invested significantly in its primary school buildings. There have been five new primary school buildings since 2000 and the council is planning a further new build of the Welsh medium primary school. The council has refurbished four primary schools and two secondary schools. New school buildings have been built to high standards and generally to time.

There is currently no commitment to further capital investment in schools within the council's capital programme. The council is making good progress in identifying future capital investment needs and funding opportunities to address these needs.

Schools rate the council's building maintenance services highly and there is a wide range of support mechanisms to schools with regard to building maintenance, health and safety and security requirements.

Admissions to schools

The council manages admissions to schools well and schools are very satisfied with the service they receive. Admissions criteria are clear and are followed consistently. The council fully meets parental first preferences.

There is an effective admissions forum, which is very proactive in supporting the monitoring and improvement of admissions arrangements. It has initiated the need for, and supported the development of, protocols for the transfer of pupils between schools and is promoting the development of a single admission date policy.

The parent's information booklet and the shorter summary booklet are concise, transparent, clear and understandable.

Home-to-school transport

The home-to-school transport service is good and works well with schools. Provision is more generous than is statutorily required.

The home-to-school transport policy is clear and the council's code of practice booklet is bilingual, clear, and concise. The policy clearly identifies the responsibilities of parents, pupils, drivers, escorts, contractors and other relevant parties.

All drivers and escorts are fully CRB\(^9\) checked and child protection awareness training is provided. A recent increase in staffing capacity will support the development of increased monitoring arrangements.

Early Years

There are effective arrangements for the management of access to early years' provision.

\(^9\) Criminal Records Bureau
118 The council uses information from annual audits well to assess demand. There are proactive initiatives to raise awareness and increase current low demand. Links with school organisation staff are strong and early years needs are fully considered within overall school reorganisation planning.

119 There is strong evidence that quality assurance and support to service providers is effective.
Findings: Will the local authority’s performance improve?

Strategic management
Grade 2: Improvement prospects are good, with no major barriers

120 There is good chief officer leadership and the new directorate structure is capable of delivering effective working between education and social services. The strategic vision as expressed in the CYPP is good and the Executive Member for Education clearly understands and is committed to the vision. This vision and the recent re-structure, bringing education and social services together in one directorate, is beginning to lead to more joined-up planning. The council has taken effective action to remove social services from special measures and, as an outcome of this action, education and social services now work more effectively together.

121 In recent years, the council has not always made difficult decisions. Whilst a number of primary schools have been closed or reorganised, necessary decisions on secondary and sixth form provision have not been taken.

122 The current political administration has only been in place since May 2008 and its ability to deliver the changes needed is as yet untested. Members are supporting secondary school reorganisation and the development of the Learning Campus. They have also shown willingness to take other difficult decisions, for example, to close a number of sub-standard care homes and to transfer the housing stock.

123 Officers have put in place a comprehensive training programme for members. This helps members to understand and exercise their leadership role and to take decisions to benefit learners.

124 Senior officers have made good use of peer support from another council. Recently the council engaged consultants to review their provision for children with ALN. This review has contributed to improvements made by the education service and schools.

Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing
Grade 2: Improvement prospects are good, with no major barriers

125 The council attaches a high priority to the promotion of social inclusion. Bringing together various groups through the reorganisation of the inclusion service has led to greater coordination and better services for vulnerable pupils.

126 The development of good consultation, partnership work, planning and openness provides the basis for future improvements. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) is an example of good co-operation between Education, Leisure, Social Services and other agencies. This has improved the effectiveness of the good work on child protection and the process of monitoring the delivery of training and of Criminal Records Bureau checks in voluntary settings.
A report on the quality of Blaenau Gwent Local Authority Education Services
October 2008

Additional learning needs (ALN)
Grade 3: Some good prospects but barriers in important areas

127 The effective consultation and process to determine priorities for the CYPP have laid a firm foundation for improved partnership working. The CYPP has set out clear priorities and direction for ALN services. This direction is complemented by the work of the LSCB in making a good start in joining up services for children and young people. In addition, the Early Years Childcare Development Partnership (EYCDP) is an effective model of partners working together in delivering a good service for children.

128 Co-ordination of the education psychology service (EPS) and ALN in the early years is good and ensures effective service delivery. In the other key stages, the co-ordination is not as good and headteachers, SENCOs, parents and carers are unclear about service priorities and the resources available. This is an important barrier.

129 The council is working effectively with headteachers of specialist units to make admission and exit criteria transparent and clear for parents and schools.

130 The strategy for raising standards for pupils who are more able and talented is at an early stage of development. The strategy being developed places appropriate emphasis on whole-school and cluster approaches and is supported well by established enrichment activities that make good links with curriculum areas.

131 The council has good mechanisms in place to collect data on pupils with ALN. Although the service is data rich, it does not use data consistently enough to challenge school practice in ALN provision. The council does not always evaluate outcomes for children and young people who have ALN well enough.

132 The council has generally made slow progress in implementing a few recommendations made in the last inspection of SEN in 2001.

Access
Grade 3: Some good prospects but barriers in important areas

133 There are some good prospects for improving the council’s work on access and school places.

134 The “way-forward” paper to be considered by the Executive committee has the potential to provide an effective basis for developing a strategy and plans to address future reorganisation and investment needs.

135 There is a wide understanding of, and commitment to, the need for further school reorganisation.

136 Information systems provide confidence that future decisions will be based on reliable information. The development of good corporate project management arrangements will provide positive support to the implementation of future school organisation and investment.
An important barrier to improvement is that the council does not yet have a member-approved strategy and plans for addressing the need for further school organisational changes, reduction of school places and improvement of school buildings. There also remains uncertainty about the sources of funding for making all council schools fit for purpose.
The authority’s response to the report findings

The Council welcomes the Estyn inspection report. We believe that it gives a clear picture of strengths and areas of development. We are pleased that the report noted many positive features, and recognised as outstanding the consultation with children and young people.

We believe that the recommendations provide an agenda for positive change. We note that change since 2001 in certain areas has been too slow, and our plans for the future will include the restructuring of the department into a model that will be fit for purpose, and will link more closely across the Community Services Directorate.

We will now work closely to produce an action plan that delivers the recommendations in a full and timely way.
## Appendix 1

### The grade profile

<table>
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<th>Will the local authority’s performance improve?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing</td>
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<td>Additional learning needs (ALN)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key question</th>
<th>1 How effective is the authority’s strategic planning?</th>
<th>2 How effective are the authority’s services?</th>
<th>3 How effective are leadership and management?</th>
<th>4 How well do leaders and managers monitor, evaluate and improve services?</th>
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<td>Strategic management</td>
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## Appendix 2

### The inspection team

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farrukh Khan HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Reporting Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arwyn Thomas HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angharad Reed HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Barlow</td>
<td>Wales Audit Office</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Blewitt</td>
<td>Additional Inspector</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Newman</td>
<td>Additional Inspector</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Lamb</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Davidson</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Jones</td>
<td>Powys LA</td>
<td>Peer Assessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharn Annett</td>
<td>Blaenau Gwent LA</td>
<td>Nominee</td>
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