Inspection of
Blaenau Gwent Local Education Authority

Support for school improvement
and
support services

January 2007

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 education authorities (LEAs);
- primary schools;
- secondary schools;
- special schools;
- pupil referral units;
- independent schools;
- further education;
- adult community-based learning;
- youth support services;
- LEAs;
- teacher education and training;
- work-based learning;
- careers companies; and
- the education, guidance and training elements of Jobcentre plus.

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.

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.gsi.gov.uk

This and other Estyn publications are available on our website: www.estyn.gov.uk

© Crown Copyright 2007: This report may be re-used free of charge in any format or medium provided that it is re-used accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the report specified.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Context</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Summary: Support for school improvement</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Summary: Support services</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Recommendations: Support for school improvement and support services</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Findings:</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How good is the local authority’s performance?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for school improvement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support services</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the local authority’s performance improve?</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  The local authority’s response to the report findings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  The grade profile</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  The composition of the inspection team</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Context

The inspection

1 In April 2006, a new cycle of local authority education service inspections under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997 and the Children Act 2004 began. Local education authority (LEA) inspections have been established to cover the period from April 2006 to March 2012. The inspection framework for the new cycle was published in May 2006. The new framework was used as the basis for the Section 38 inspection and this report.

2 The inspection took place in January 2007. The focus of this inspection was agreed to be support for school improvement and support services. The findings are reported using the relevant sections of the new framework relating to those areas. Before the inspection, Blaenau Gwent LEA undertook a review of support for school improvement and support services and produced a self-evaluation report as part of its own review process.

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

6 In order to make the two key judgements, inspectors evaluate the authority’s performance in relation to each of four key questions. These four key questions and the evaluations are set out in Section 4 (findings) and also 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 (Section 6).

Background to the authority

7 Blaenau Gwent is made up of three distinctive valleys in South-East Wales. It
contains five main towns, the largest of which is Ebbw Vale. Historically, the area
was dominated by the heavy industries of steel manufacture and coal mining.
However, with the demise of these industries, the area has experienced high rates of
unemployment and a high incidence of social deprivation. Almost all wards qualify
for Communities First status.

8 Regeneration schemes for the area include the re-opening of the railway from Cardiff
to Ebbw Vale, 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.

9 Blaenau Gwent is the smallest unitary authority in Wales and has a decreasing
population. According to the 2001 census, it has a population of 68,900. Between
1998 and 2002, the population decreased by 19%. Fewer than 1% of the population
are from minority ethnic groups and 7% are Welsh speakers.

Schools in the authority

10 The falling school population has led to the implementation of a rationalisation plan to
reduce the number of surplus places. Since 1996, when the County Borough
became a unitary authority, the number of primary schools has been reduced from 43
to 29 through a programme of amalgamation and new build.

11 There is one Welsh-medium primary school with a roll of 300 pupils, none of whom
come from Welsh-speaking homes. There are six secondary schools, four of which
offer education to the 11-18 age range and the remaining two offer education to the
11-16 age range. There is one school that provides for pupils with special
educational needs and one pupil referral unit for pupils with emotional and
behavioural difficulties. In January 2006, the school population was 10,497. The
percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs is 3.25% and
close to the Wales average of 3.21%. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school
meals in Blaenau Gwent in January 2006 was 26.2%, the second highest in Wales.

12 The following table compares the performance of pupils in Blaenau Gwent schools in
National Curriculum teacher assessments with that of pupils throughout Wales.

---

1 The Communities First programme is a long-term strategy for improving the living conditions and
prospects for people in the most disadvantaged areas in Wales. The programme seeks to ensure
that the funds and support available from the Welsh Assembly Government and various other
publicly funded agencies are targeted at the poorest areas.
The percentage of pupils attaining the core subject indicator (CSI) in each key stage in Blaenau Gwent and Wales in 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Key stage 1</th>
<th>Key stage 2</th>
<th>Key stage 3</th>
<th>Key stage 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaenau Gwent</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2005, the council was restructured to carry out the governance of its work by means of cross-cutting themes. The new executive is made up of the leader and eight elected members who hold portfolios for different aspects of the council’s work. Two portfolios cover the work of the education department: these are ‘Creating Jobs and Skills’ (representing adult and continuing education); and ‘Helping People into Work’ (covering school-based education and youth services). There are five scrutiny committees and the work of the education department is covered by the ‘Economy and Regeneration’ scrutiny committee.

Funding

The Welsh Assembly Government’s 2006-2007 standard spending assessment (SSA)\(^2\) per head of population for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council is the highest for local authorities in Wales. Within this, the education component (the education indicator-based assessment (IBA)\(^3\)) amounts to £47.1 million. This represents an average of £4,289 for each pupil, which is the sixth highest level of IBA per pupil in Wales. The level of the education IBA reflects the indicators that contribute to the allocation formula, including deprivation and sparsity.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has set overall budgets for managing and delivering its services at a level 3.3% above the SSA and with education budgets in line with the education IBA level. The net education budget\(^4\) for 2006-2007 was set at a level representing 100.7% of the education IBA.

The total net education revenue budget per pupil in Blaenau Gwent is £4,319, sixth highest of the 22 councils in Wales.

The pattern of education expenditure in relation to the IBA and SSA has remained similar for the last three years.

---

\(^2\) SSA is the means by which the Welsh Assembly Government distributes Revenue Support Grant to local authorities.

\(^3\) 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.

\(^4\) The net education budget excludes income from specific grants.
2 Summary: Support for School Improvement

18 The scoring chart displays information in two dimensions, one for each of the two key inspection judgements. The inspection judgements are represented by the position of the black circle in relation to the descriptors at the left-hand side and at the foot of the chart.

### Scoring chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How good is the local authority’s performance?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Will the local authority’s performance improve?

Blaenau Gwent LEA: Support for school improvement

Support for school improvement – How good is the LEA’s performance?

**Grade 2: Good features and no important shortcomings**

19 The good features of the local authority’s performance are that:

- the council is consistent in giving a high priority to education in strategic documents;
- senior education officers provide strong leadership;
the staffing structure is stable with key officers in post after periods of uncertainty when the council took too long to confirm the permanent appointments of senior officers;

relationships with schools are very good because there are high levels of trust and confidence between schools and the school improvement service;

procedures for monitoring schools, providing support, challenge and intervention are appropriate, clearly defined and valued by schools;

link advisers and advisory teachers provide very effective support;

the council provides a range of good improvement programmes, for example to support pupils’ transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3, improve pupils’ basic and key skills and to prepare for the Foundation Phase;

the council uses a broad range of data to set targets and explains them carefully to schools;

there is very effective early intervention to support schools when concerns are identified;

all schools inspected under the common inspection framework have received positive reports and no school has been identified with serious weaknesses or as needing special measures, which is a significant strength;

the council brokers good support services externally, for example for music, athrawon bro and Gwent Theatre in Education, that are valued by schools;

pupils’ attainment in National Curriculum assessments at key stage 2 has shown steady improvement since 2004; and

there is recent improvement at key stage 4 in pupils’ attainment of 5 A*-C grade GCSEs and the core subjects.

The following areas require attention:

- targets in the council’s strategic plans are not always consistent and this can result in a lack of clarity about priorities;
- the single education plan does not identify the poor performance of pupils in key stage 1 or the significant gap in performance between boys and girls at key stage 1;
- pupil attainment is not improving enough at key stage 1 or consistently at key stages 3 and 4;
- the council uses a broad range of data about performance but messages from data analysis are not always clear enough for politicians; and
- resources could be even more sharply targeted on those schools that need most support.
3 Summary: Support services

Scoring chart

Blaenau Gwent LEA: Support services

How good is the local authority’s performance?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Will the local authority’s performance improve?

Support services – How good is the LEA’s performance?

**Grade 2: Good features and no important shortcomings**

21 The good features of the local authority’s performance are that:

- schools identify a general improvement in the quality and delivery of support services over the last three years;
- schools receive highly effective support for finance and information communications technology (ICT); and
- governing bodies receive effective support from link advisers, who provide useful in-house training, and a highly efficient clerking service.

22 The following area requires attention:

- service-level agreements do not provide clear and measurable information about the cost and quality of services to be provided.
Support for school improvement and support service – Will the local authority’s performance improve?

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

23 Factors that are likely to support improvement are that:

- elected members receive an increasing amount of information about strategies and their understanding of how the services function is developing at a steady pace;
- the council has an improving track record of tackling difficult issues effectively, for example primary school reorganisation, improving the quality of social services and budget control;
- there is good leadership of programmes and teams at operational level;
- the leadership and engagement with the South East Wales Consortium are sound;
- the council supports officers well through training and professional development processes; and
- a range of new and well-planned strategies to support school improvement have been introduced.

24 The factors that are likely to hinder improvement are set out below:

- elected members do not seek enough detail about the performance of individual schools so as to make effective strategic decisions;
- performance data is not always used sharply enough to determine strategic priorities, for example about baseline and key stage 1 performance and gender performance issues;
- elected members rely too much on officers for direction and do not offer enough challenge. For example, there was little member involvement in the self-evaluation report;
- performance management remains inconsistent and tends to focus on processes rather than on outcomes;
- budget allocations are not clearly related to council priorities as set out in the corporate improvement plan;

---

5 The South East Wales Consortium was established to support teacher workforce remodelling. It involves the directors of education from Blaenau Gwent, Cardiff, Newport, Monmouthshire and Torfaen. It meets twice per term. Its work has been extended under the Making the Connections and the Beecham agenda to look at further collaboration on school improvement services and additional learning needs support.
there is a lack of consultation and information-sharing with governors; and

progress in developing the learning campus for post-16 education is slow and uncertain.
4 Recommendations: Support for school improvement and support services

In order to secure the improvements that are needed, the council should:

R1 use performance information more rigorously to determine school improvement priorities so as to allocate and target resources where they are needed most to raise standards;

R2 include measurable outcomes in improvement programmes so that their impact can be evaluated;

R3 provide elected members with clear detail about the performance of individual schools so that they can challenge the services more sharply;

R4 do more to inform and consult school governors about council strategy;

R5 ensure that all service level agreements are consistent and detailed so that schools have clear understanding of what they are buying;

R6 implement plans more effectively to remove the uncertainty in schools over future post-16 education;

R7 move forward more robustly on area-wide initiatives to improve performance at key stage 1 and 14-19 provision in particular; and

R8 continue to develop initiatives to address the gender gap in attainment.
5 Findings

26 The two judgements for the fields inspected are shown in the tables below.

Support for School Improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 2: Good features and no important shortcomings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How good is the LEA’s performance?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the prospects for improvement?</td>
<td>Some good prospects, but barriers in important areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 2: Good features and no important shortcomings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How good is the LEA’s performance?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the prospects for improvement?</td>
<td>Some good prospects, but barriers in important areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How good is the local authority’s performance?

Grade 2: Good features and no important shortcomings

Key question 1: How effective is the authority’s strategic planning?

27 Overall, the authority’s work in corporate planning and joining together strategic and operational planning is good. The priorities set out in policies and strategic plans for education and lifelong learning link well to those in the programme of economic regeneration for Blaenau Gwent. These policies and plans take very good account of the direction and legislation of the Welsh Assembly Government. However, there are inconsistencies in the authority’s main strategic plans relating to school improvement targets. For instance, in the single education plan there is too little emphasis on raising standards in key stage 1. This means that the council is not clear about some targets and areas of focus for improvement.

28 Senior officers, headteachers and scrutiny members have a sound overall understanding of the authority’s strategic direction and are committed to meeting the identified educational priorities. This has enabled the authority to address some important issues, including recovering from a position of overall deficit in schools’ budgets, through increased funding for schools and the provision of additional financial management support.

29 The strategic direction of the school improvement service is set by the priorities of the single education plan (SEP). Generally, this is a well-focused plan that identifies priorities and objectives for service developments and links appropriately to corporate and strategic plans. However, the plan fails to identify the poor performance of pupils at key stage 1 as a significant area for improvement to be addressed.
30 The authority is effective in consulting with key partners about the priorities for education and lifelong learning. The targets for education, as set out in the community plan, have been agreed with a wide number of partners, including the Community Consortium for Education and Training (CCET), headteachers, governors and members of the Youth Forum, ‘Talk it Up’. This forum, organised by the Children and Young People’s Partnership Framework, links with individual school councils and is consulted with regard to all strategic matters. These partners monitor progress on the agreed targets of the community plan. As a result, there is a good level of shared understanding of education priorities by schools and many other partners.

31 The school improvement service contributes well to the Children and Young People’s Partnership through effective planning, monitoring and evaluation of a range of initiatives to enhance the opportunities of pre-school and early years children through the ‘Sure Start’ and ‘Flying Start’ programmes. These initiatives link coherently to the strategic direction of the authority’s priorities and plans and have the potential to improve the learning of children before they start formal education.

32 The positive approach to working with others has led to effective partnership work that helps develop the capacity of the authority to deliver services. For example, through the South East Wales Consortium, the authority effectively brokers music services, athrawon bro and Gwent ethnic minority support service.

33 The authority plans the use of external funding well to target support according to need. An example of particularly good planning and evaluation is the programme that is funded through the Basic Skills Agency strategic intervention grant.

Key Question 2: How effective are services and how does performance compare, including value for money?

Support for school improvement

34 The council’s school improvement service places schools in one of five categories for support and advice. The categories range from a minimal support package of three adviser days per year up to 20 or more days’ support. The criteria used to determine the level of support includes a detailed analysis of individual school performance, Estyn inspection judgements, pupil behaviour and attendance information, school budgetary positions, complaints and the school staffing situation. Headteachers have approved the criteria used to agree the level of support required.

35 Schools that experience difficulties or that are underperforming are placed in a higher category for support.

---

6 Sure Start projects support very young children and their families. They aim to give children a better start in life. Projects usually involve local education authorities, social services, health and organisations in the voluntary section working together.

7 Flying Start – Services that will deliver free, good-quality, part-time childcare for two year-olds to help prepare them for school. They will also provide increased levels of support from health visitors and parenting programmes to give young children the best possible start in life. These programmes are being developed from January 2007.
The school improvement service provides a good level of support to schools across Blaenau Gwent. The approach to monitoring the performance of schools is effective and well structured. Link advisers provide good support on data analysis, setting targets and the development of school-based initiatives such as basic skills support.

Schools’ self-evaluation links well with both school development planning and planning cycles within the council. The self-evaluation policy for schools is clear and comprehensive. The guidance provided to schools to undertake the self-evaluation review and to develop the school development plan is good. The priorities agreed by schools are generally strategic, realistic and time-bound.

There is a well-structured and good system for recording link adviser visits to schools. All visits have a clear agenda, are minuted and clear recommendations for action are agreed and recorded.

Since 2000 the gap between Blaenau Gwent performance and the Welsh average has narrowed in National Curriculum assessments (CSI) at all stages except in key stage 1. At key stage 2, the gap narrowed from 12.4% in 2000, to 6.2% in 2006. Over the same period, the CSI attainment gap at key stage 4 narrowed from 9.0% to 6.9% and for 5 GCSE passes at A*-C from 13.0% to 5.8%.

In comparison with other councils with similar levels of free school meals, pupils’ performance in Blaenau Gwent was very slightly below expected levels at all stages in benchmarking for 2005 (latest published year).

Blaenau Gwent was one of the authorities with the highest ‘value added’ scores between key stage 2 and key stage 4 using the Fischer Family Trust 2005 analysis for the Welsh Assembly Government. The authority places emphasis on the value added data when planning school improvement targets but has not included every stage from baseline in the analysis.

Data on pupils in their final year of compulsory education for 2006 shows that Blaenau Gwent performs below the Welsh average for seven out of the eight key performance indicators. However recent improvements have raised attainment above that in some other councils with similarly high levels of social and economic disadvantage.

Since the local government reorganisation in 1996, all primary and secondary schools inspected by Estyn have met, or exceeded, the Welsh Assembly Government target for 2007 that standards of achievement should be satisfactory in 98% of classes. Three-quarters of these schools have also exceeded the target that standards should be good or very good in at least 65% of classes. Since the introduction of Estyn’s common inspection framework in 2003, in all but two of the schools inspected, grades for the key questions have all been Grade 2 or above. School inspection reports indicate that the authority’s programmes to improve pupils’ progress in literacy and numeracy are having a positive impact. Despite these good features, results in teacher assessments at key stages 1 and 3 have been disappointing.

---

8 Core subject indicator (CSI) – this indicator shows the percentage of pupils who attain the level expected of them in mathematics, science and either English or Welsh as a first language.
9 National Assembly for Wales (SDR164/2006, Table 2)
The early identification of difficulties and, where necessary, intervention by the council in schools have contributed to the fact that Estyn has not judged any school in Blaenau Gwent as having serious weaknesses.

The school improvement service provides a good range of appropriate activities to support and enhance the curriculum. These include good quality programmes for literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology, special educational needs, sport and physical health, early years and modern foreign languages. The service has also included appropriate training for the introduction of the Foundation Phase although this has yet to have an impact on raising standards.

Activities to support the development of 14-19 Learning Pathways are at an early stage and are small in scale. They are delivered in partnership with Blaenau Gwent Training Centre and Coleg Gwent. One hundred and fifty pupils annually are able to follow courses leading to OCN qualifications. However, planning and activity in developing the learning campus for post-16 education have been long-drawn-out. There is too much optimism about the project and not enough contingency planning taking place in case the campus does not happen. The four school sixth forms are small; Estyn’s area inspection report of March 2005 noted that there are major issues in relation to their cost effectiveness, the value for money they offer and their viability. The council identifies the local area network plan as a priority in its single education plan and is due to publish an action plan in March 2007 but progress is slow.

The council has undertaken an effective analysis of the training needs of senior and middle managers in schools and, as a result, provided an appropriate range of training. Training and development courses are of good quality and reflect the priorities of the education service. For example, ‘experts’ from Kings College London recently led training on assessment for learning and officers attended a national Narrowing the Gap conference that focussed on tackling male underachievement.

The authority makes good use of the continuing professional development (CPD) group to identify and meet the professional development needs of teachers. Management training through a ‘Learning to Lead’ scheme, delivered by the school improvement service, has been very well received, providing teachers with a good mix of practical skills and wider theoretical knowledge. In one school, this training effectively equipped a teacher with the skills necessary to undertake a whole school review of mathematics and resulted in the remodelling of the whole approach to the subject across the school.

The school improvement service provides a good range of useful support to governors in schools through the school link adviser but does not help governors understand the strategic direction of the council well enough. Link advisers provide and explain performance data for governors’ individual schools and help governors with target setting and planning for improvement. The authority provides an efficient, comprehensive clerking service for school governors. However, the authority has not identified the development needs of governors in schools across the county borough well enough. The authority is currently undertaking a review of governor support but has not involved governors enough in the evaluation.

---

10 Open College Network (OCN) – This accredits units and qualifications that are mainly for adults but are also available for young people.
The school improvement service consistently monitors the quality of the training provided to schools. Overall, the authority has received positive evaluations indicating that the quality of the training provided in the last two years has been excellent or very good. Where the authority has identified specific needs and delivered training across the county borough there has been a noticeable impact on standards. For example, the training to improve standards of numeracy in key stage 2 resulted in raising the attainment of pupils in national curriculum teacher assessments in 2005. The evaluation is used well to identify future training needs.

The council has used benchmarking data collected through the Association of Directors of Education in Wales all-Wales Benchmarking Group to contribute to assessing the value for money of the school improvement service. However, the information is limited and external consultants were commissioned to provide further analysis. This analysis suggested that spending on school improvement was similar to that in neighbouring authorities. A more recent comparison of proposed budgets for 2006-2007 suggests that Blaenau Gwent would spend £50 per pupil on school improvement. This is the fifth lowest of the 22 unitary authorities in Wales and is below the Welsh average of £76. The council has not assessed whether this is enough to support the achievement of its targets.

Support services

There are individual service level agreements (SLAs) for each of the different services offered by the authority. While schools have the option of buying services individually, almost all schools purchase the different services as one complete set. These SLAs vary in quality and most do not set out either the standards against which schools can judge the quality of service or the costs of the services. Schools do not question enough whether they receive good value for money but nevertheless express high levels of satisfaction about the service provided.

The authority has satisfactory procedures for brokering a small range of services through the South-East Wales Consortium. The athrawon bro and Gwent music service are both purchased through SLAs through this consortium. Another service that is purchased is the Gwent education multi-ethnic support service (GEMSS). The effectiveness of this provision relies too heavily on informal feedback from schools and is not monitored effectively. This arrangement lacks rigour and does not enable the authority to identify weaknesses and address them in a systematic manner with service providers. The exception is the Gwent music service where the authority has procured a much improved model of service provision. The new style service links to the priorities set in the single education plan. There are appropriate plans to improve brokering and monitoring procedures across the service.

The financial support for schools is excellent and highly valued by schools. The finance officers provide an effective system of support and provide each school with a comprehensive support pack. The service responds quickly and effectively to queries from schools.

The finance support team has helped schools to manage their own budgets more effectively and contributed to reducing the number of schools with deficit budgets. The team provides training for headteachers, other staff, prospective headteachers
and deputy headteachers as part of National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH)\textsuperscript{11} training, and for governors.

56 The division of human resource (HR) responsibilities for staff between the council and schools is well understood by all concerned but the written staffing policy has not been reviewed for three years. The authority makes appropriate checks on new and existing staff and maintains suitable records. These checks include verifying identity and qualifications, taking up written references and obtaining disclosures from the Criminal Records Bureau. There are a large number of applications for most school posts and no recruitment or retention issues. Contracts of employment are now issued within the statutory time period although this has been a shortcoming in the past. Payroll support is good and, in the event of school staff absence, the service provides appropriate basic administration to ensure that, for example payroll and invoicing are kept up-to-date.

57 The council has a range of HR policies in place that meet legal requirements. Most have been reviewed recently and give appropriate detail. Policies for redundancy and capability are still due for review. Headteachers and governors are offered personnel training during the term in which a new policy is adopted. The take-up of governor training is very low and the authority is considering new ways to reorganise training and encourage attendance.

58 HR officers have appropriate training and qualifications and suitable systems to ensure that they receive up-to-date advice about legal changes. They have experience of resolving some difficult casework; the incidence of industrial tribunals is low; and relations with unions are generally good. However, despite this, schools lack confidence in the advice of the service and do not feel that HR staff always give accurate advice. Schools are sometimes confused by conflicting information they get elsewhere but acknowledge that the service’s recent work to provide additional external training is an efficient step.

59 Headteachers express high levels of satisfaction with the SIMS software support provided. They acknowledge that there is a fast, good quality response from the SIMS support officer in the LEA.

60 The council’s website provides the public with a range of useful information but some key documents such as the single education plan and information about the performance of schools were not available on the website at the time of the inspection. The website pages for education were being updated following re-organisation of responsibility from corporate to service-based officers.

61 Information on the cost of individual support services is not provided in the SLAs and there has been no analysis of how variations in expenditure would impact on services. The council ‘Virtual Policy Networks Value for Money’ group is expected to consider whether there are efficiencies to be achieved from any service re-engineering that may involve support teams but this has not yet been developed. The role of schools as purchasers is under-developed and there has been limited consideration of the value for money of support services provided.

\textsuperscript{11} NPQH – A compulsory qualification for those who want to become headteachers.
Will the local authority's performance improve?

**Grade 3: Some good prospects, but barriers in important areas**

**Key Question 3: How effective are leadership and strategic management?**

62 Elected members are committed to promoting education as a part of the council’s ‘Helping People into Work’ portfolio which brings together education and regeneration services. Joint strategic planning for education and youth services is part of this policy. Joint working across the Council is bringing about improvements in services for children and young people; for example, members have made it easier for young people to use information technology in a wide range of settings across the county borough. They have also increased the range of sport and leisure facilities available to young people outside of school hours as part of the ‘healthy schools’ initiative and improved provision for poor school attenders and excluded pupils. However, although education is a stated priority within the council’s improvement programme, the council has allocated resources to education in its 2006-2007 budget largely on the basis of perception of need rather than by means of a rigorous analysis of children and young people’s standards of achievement in the county borough.

63 Officers provide members with regular briefings and reports on national and local educational issues. Members understand the overall performance of schools but they do not always use information on standards of achievement objectively or analytically to target resources where most needed, for example, in the early years and key stage 1. Officers do not share performance data about identified schools openly with elected members. Therefore members do not know how well each school is doing compared with others. Without this level of detail, members are not able to evaluate the effectiveness of its investment in the school improvement service.

64 The ‘Economy and Regeneration’ scrutiny committee is beginning to ask some of the right questions about educational issues. For example, they have enquired about vocational courses, the education of pupils who are not in school and funding for pupils with special educational needs. The committee ensures that young people are consulted and are able to influence policy in areas such as anti-bullying programmes and the draft proposals for the reorganisation of post 16 education. However, although the scrutiny role is developing, members do not challenge rigorously enough. For example, members did not contribute to the self-evaluation report that officers provided for the inspection. Members depend too much on officers to advise them about any necessary service improvements and resource implications. They are unaware of how services compare with similar services in other authorities. Overall, members do not take enough responsibility for assuring the quality of services.

65 The council has an uneven record regarding strategic decision-making in education. It has been most successful in its reorganisation of primary schools. However, it stepped back from a proposed amalgamation of two comprehensive schools in one area of the borough because of local opposition. The council is committed to the proposals for the learning campus in Ebbw Vale but has not yet secured formal agreements with the strategy from all stakeholders. On occasion, members allow
Inspection of Blaenau Gwent Local Education Authority
January 2007

local interests to override strategic educational considerations. As a result, there is only minimal evidence of members using a full process of rigorous, open debate and consultation to make education decisions. However, there is a recent example, regarding the closure of care homes for the elderly, of the ability of members to take difficult and potentially unpopular decisions.

66 The corporate director of lifelong learning has established very good relationships with elected members and schools and secured widespread support for the improvement agenda. He has a clear vision of the way forward in respect of local and national priorities. The education department as a whole is committed to raising standards and expectations. The single education plan (SEP) provides an appropriate means of putting improvement strategies into practice. The SEP and the self-evaluation report are particularly thorough in respect of the work that has taken place, or is planned, to achieve statutory school targets but they do not give a high enough priority to raising standards in the early years and key stage 1.

67 The chief school improvement officer and team leaders provide strong leadership and effective direction to the school improvement programme and support services. The teams for school improvement and support services work very well together, particularly through link advisers. The criteria for monitoring, support and intervention in schools are clear and understood by everyone. Work programmes focus appropriately on the priorities of the SEP. Planning is thorough but some of success criteria lack measurable outcomes to evaluate the impact of the services. The implementation of the council’s management training programme over a three year period from 2005 as part of its ‘People Strategy’ is improving the skills and capacities of managers and officers.

68 There is good consultation with service users, the public and partners. The school improvement service and support services have very good relationships with schools and communication is clear and responsive, particularly for educational, financial and IT support. Senior officers and school link advisers are an effective conduit between the council and its schools. Schools respect advisory staff for their expertise and their challenge as ‘critical friends’. Consultation is generally open. It is particularly effective through meetings of headteachers and cluster groups. However, there is no governors’ consultative group or newsletter to take account of governors’ views or to keep them up to date with strategic developments.

69 Partnership working is stronger within the council as a result of the restructuring of its committees and services. There is a clear structure for the strategic development of integrated children’s services that involves education, the local health board and social services. There are well-developed partnerships between officers at different levels and schools. The well-established cluster groups of schools work effectively together and with officers on educational and community initiatives such as improving transition from primary to secondary school.

70 Most recently, membership of the South-East Wales Consortium has enabled the council to provide very good support for workforce remodelling and leadership training for headteachers. Other support, for example, for subject development, is brokered from external agencies but the consortium has commissioned an external agency to identify ways to provide advisory support even more efficiently.
Strategic planning to increase the numbers of young people continuing in education after the age of 16 is at an early stage. The 14-19 area network development plan involves a range of appropriate partners but proposals lack a cohesive strategic approach, based on identified need.

**Key Question 4: How well do leaders and managers at all levels monitor, evaluate and improve services?**

Overall, the council has a very positive attitude towards the importance of education. As a result, systems to monitor, evaluate and improve services have improved considerably recently but from a low base.

The time taken to confirm permanent appointments of senior officers over the last few years has led to some instability and uncertainty within the service, and to concerns in schools about the workload of officers and continual change. Recent senior appointments now allow the service to concentrate on planning for school improvement rather than on internal matters and have given schools more confidence that support systems are robust and will help them move forward.

There are good relationships between elected members, staff in schools and officers of the education service based on a sound level of trust and confidence. This is strongest between staff in schools and link advisers. Officers monitor the progress of schools and individual pupils well and in particular, have innovative strategies to monitor the progress of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in relation to targets set in the pupils’ individual education plans (IEPs). They set challenging targets for schools and scrutinise performance carefully. Officers have developed some rigorous strategies to raise standards in some areas and fine tune these well to reflect the specific needs of particular schools. There has been clear impact on standards in those areas targeted such as numeracy in key stage 2.

The authority’s self evaluation review for the inspection included an external audit of the school improvement service in October 2006. Although detailed, the authority’s self evaluation report did not include information about pupils’ progress at key stage 1. The support service department also carries out regular self-assessment of its provision and then develops appropriate action plans for internal use. Schools complete questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of training and provision on a regular basis and the service takes good account of the information. However, the internal self-assessment process is not consistent or well understood by everyone in the department. It does not link in well enough to the self-evaluation review and the action plans are not clear.

Elected members receive formal self-evaluation documents but officers did not consider it necessary to involve them in the self-evaluation process. The council arranges monthly meetings as part of their engagement protocol with regulators\(^\text{12}\) to discuss areas of potential risk.

The council shows a good record of improvement where it has targeted specific areas such as raising standards of attainment at key stage 2 and improving the

\(^{12}\) The council’s regulators include inspectors from the Wales Audit Office, Social Services in Wales and Estyn who attend these meetings.
percentage of pupils gaining 5 A* - C grades at GCSE. However, the council did not identify the importance of raising standards at key stage 1 as of enough significance to achieve its own challenging targets by 2009.

78 Elected members of the ‘Economy and Regeneration’ scrutiny committee and of the ‘Finance, Improvement and Performance’ scrutiny committee receive regular performance management reports. The reports have focused on key national data sets and the council is now developing ‘balanced scorecard’ datasets which are intended to include a wider range of locally important information.

79 Information on a ‘value added’ analysis from key stage 2 to key stage 4 that included improved GCSE attainment was given to elected members in August 2006. The report did not include baseline and key stage 1 information so did not give a full picture of overall performance. The authority will not provide further information on attainment in 2006 to members until February 2007.

80 Schools’ performance information for members is anonymised and this prevents a full understanding of the performance issues. It limits the ability of members to see the relationships between regeneration, social and economic activity and educational attainment and reduces schools’ accountabilities. When members do identify an issue it is not always followed through quickly or in enough depth. For example, they requested a report on the gender gap in attainment that highlighted the very low key stage 1 performance of boys but have not required any monitoring of improvement to be included in performance reporting. The lack of extensive or detailed knowledge has implications for wider issues such as influencing how the council agrees the education budget.

81 Elected members have contributed well to some areas of policy development, such as a healthy schools initiative, through the work of small task and finish groups.

82 The scrutiny committees are large with over 20 elected members plus co-optees with the result that the system is not always effective enough. The chief executive is undertaking a review of scrutiny arrangements.

83 The council has a mixed track record for securing improvements but there are examples of some good recent progress. For example, the council has managed the primary school reorganisation programme well, made significant changes to the system of SEN funding so that responsibility is now devolved to schools and improved the social services department to bring it out of special measures. In some other areas such as rationalising secondary school places, the council’s plans have been frustrated by local opposition.
6 The local authority’s response to the report findings

We would like to thank the inspection team for the professional manner in which the inspection was conducted. The process was very thorough and rigorous.

We are pleased that the report acknowledges the strengths of the services inspected. The grades awarded for the performance of the services reflect the council’s self-evaluation report grades.

The inspection report acknowledges that there is a good relationship between elected members, departmental staff and schools. We are confident that this forms a strong foundation for overcoming any barriers to the continued improvement of services. Furthermore, the council recognises the importance of effective member development in its continuing improvement journey and is currently planning an extensive development programme. This programme will build significantly on the sessions already delivered, including the further development of the role of scrutiny committees to challenge performance in a rigorous and consistent manner.

Overcoming the under attainment of boys forms a major part of the education department’s strategic plans for the foreseeable future and is a significant part of the current single education plan.

The Council looks forward to developing and implementing an action plan to address the recommendations made by the inspection team. It has already started to develop this plan prior to the publication of the inspection report.
## 7 The grade profile

### Section 38 LEA inspection grade profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key judgement</th>
<th>Support for school improvement</th>
<th>Support services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How good is the authority’s performance?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the authority’s performance improve?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key question</th>
<th>Support for school improvement</th>
<th>Support services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 How effective is the authorities strategic planning?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 How effective are the authority’s services?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 How effective are leadership and management?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 How well do leaders and managers monitor, evaluate and improve services?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8 The composition of the inspection team

The inspection team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary Lait HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Reporting Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrukh Khan HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy Hawkins HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Roberts HMI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan Jones AI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry Williams AI</td>
<td>Estyn</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Martin</td>
<td>Wales Audit Office</td>
<td>Team Inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Barbour</td>
<td>Swansea LEA</td>
<td>Peer Assessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayne Davies</td>
<td>Blaenau Gwent LEA</td>
<td>Nominee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>