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Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

**A report on the quality of local authority education
services for children and young people**

in

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

November 2010

by

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

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on their capacity to improve.

In these evaluations, we use a four-point scale:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Unsatisfactory

The report was produced in accordance with section 38 of the Education Act 1997, the Children Act 2004 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court

Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.uk

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Context

Directorate

The Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning Directorate includes the following functions: schools, leisure and lifelong learning, libraries and responsibility for an information technology (IT) centre. It is led by a Director who is supported by three Heads of Service, with specified responsibilities for:

- Schools, Inclusion and Lifelong Learning Development;
- Partnership and Community Development; and
- Support Services and Commissioning Development.

Context

Neath Port Talbot local authority covers an area of South West Wales bordered by Swansea to the west, Bridgend to the east and Carmarthenshire, Powys and Rhondda Cynon Taff to the north. It was created by the local government reorganisation of 1996, being formed from part of the previous county of West Glamorgan. In 2008, the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation placed 19% of Neath Port Talbot's communities in the most deprived ten percent in Wales, for overall deprivation. This is the third highest in Wales. In 2009, the population of the Borough was estimated at 137,425, making Neath Port Talbot the eighth largest Council in Wales. From 2009 to 2021, it is expected that the population will grow by 7,000, an increase of about 5%. Whilst generally the population under 65 will remain stable, the expected increase in the population over 65 is significant.

Ninety per cent of the population of the Borough was born in Wales and 20.3% of the population can speak Welsh compared with 25.6 % of the total population of Wales. This is the tenth highest percentage among local authorities in Wales. The highest percentage of Welsh speakers is in the 10-15 year age group (36%).

In 2009 the employment rate in Neath Port Talbot was 60.7%. This was the second lowest amongst the 22 Welsh local authorities. The percentage of working age adults with no qualifications has gradually fallen since 2000 while the percentage of working age adults with qualifications at NQF level 4+ has gradually risen since 2001.

The local authority maintains 85 schools: 71 primary schools, 11 secondary schools, three special schools and three pupil referral units. Within this structure the authority also supports 21 learning support centres located within mainstream schools. These centres cater for a wide range of additional needs.

Currently 98% of three-year-olds and 98.7% of four-year-olds access the authority's early years provision. The whole school population is 20,825 pupils. The pupil teacher-ratio is 17.5, which is close to the Wales average of 17.6. In primary schools, the average class size is 19.3 and in secondary schools 16.3. These figures are close to the Wales average.

The percentage of pupils in compulsory education entitled to free school meals is 24.9% and 20.1% in primary and secondary schools respectively. Overall, 22.7% of pupils are entitled to free school meals compared with 18.9% nationally. This is the fourth highest in Wales. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds (non-white British) is 4.6% in comparison with the Wales average of 8.2%.

There are 442 pupils who are looked after by the local authority, 48 more than a year ago. This represents a substantial increase in a relatively short time.

Funding

The Welsh Assembly Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per head of population for Neath Port Talbot for 2010-2011 was slightly above the average for local authorities in Wales. The council has set its overall revenue budget at 104.4% of SSA, a higher ratio than any other council in Wales. In contrast, its Education budget was set at 99.5% of its Education IBA, close to the Wales average. Over the last five years this has fallen from 102.7%, which was then the third highest in Wales. Nevertheless, the net education budget for 2010-2011 is equivalent to £5,125 per pupil compared with an average of £4,800 for Wales as a whole.

The individual budget for primary schools (£4,044 per pupil) is the third highest in Wales, whereas that for secondary schools (£4,229 per pupil) is close to the Wales average.

Summary

Overall judgement: Good

The local authority's education services for children and young people are good because:

- children and young people make steady progress and at the end of key stage 4 achieve very good standards;
- the number of young people leaving full-time education without a recognised qualification has fallen significantly and is better than the average for Wales; and
- support for school improvement is good and support for additional learning needs (ALN) is excellent.

Capacity to improve: Good

The local authority has good prospects for improvement because:

- its work is founded on well thought out principles about the quality of service delivery;
- there is effective decision-making and prioritisation about school improvement and school organisation; and
- senior officers and elected members provide effective leadership through their good understanding of the improvement priorities and performance within the Education service.

Recommendations

In order to improve, the authority should:

- R1 improve the accuracy of end-of-key-stage teacher assessments at all key stages;
- R2 further refine and strengthen scrutiny arrangements;
- R3 improve joint strategic planning and the impact of the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP); and
- R4 reduce surplus places in schools in line with key principles in the strategic school improvement programme (SSIP).

What happens next?

Neath Port Talbot local authority will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 50 working days of receipt of the report.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Good

Standards: Good

Overall, standards in Neath Port Talbot are good. When a range of contextual information is taken into account, the performance of pupils in Neath Port Talbot is below average in key stage 1, average in key stage 2 and good in key stage 3. At key stage 4, performance is very good; results in nearly all of the main indicators are above all-Wales averages, as they have been for the last four years. When compared to similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, over half of the secondary schools are in the top quarter and only one school is in the bottom quarter. Pupils generally make good progress in their learning as evidenced in their value-added data between each key stage, which is good and very good at key stages 3 and 4.

Performance in key stages 3 and 4, based on entitlement to free school meals, has met or exceeded all of the Welsh Assembly Government benchmarks in the last four years. Neath Port Talbot is one of the few authorities that have achieved this.

In key stages 1, 2 and 3, the gap in performance between boys and girls is greater than the average for Wales. However, in key stage 4 the gap reduces and boys' performance is better than that of girls when compared with national averages.

Particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, generally attain at or above expected levels. Learners make good progress in gaining skills in first and second language Welsh and generally achieve good standards in both subjects.

Many learners make good progress to the next stage in their education, training or employment. The percentage of pupils in Neath Port Talbot remaining in full-time education or training at 16 has improved at a faster rate than in the rest of Wales and compares well to similar authorities. The number leaving full-time education without a recognised qualification has fallen significantly and is better than the national average. However, the percentage of learners not in education, employment or training (NEETs) has not improved at a similar pace.

There are good examples of young people achieving well in informal and non-formal settings.

Wellbeing: Good

Standards of wellbeing are generally good. The authority has a wide range of successful initiatives and strategies to promote participation in and enjoyment of learning. Attendance figures in the secondary sector are very good and in the primary sector are in line with the socio-economic context of the area. Exclusions have fallen across the authority in both primary and secondary schools.

The authority's own evaluations of projects, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), report positive impacts on pupil behaviour and teaching and learning. In a few areas, young people do not have good access to youth clubs.

Overall, the authority involves children and young people well in the development of strategies, policies and services, as well as the decisions that affect them. This involvement has helped them to know about healthy eating and fitness and to improve their participation in a wide range of physical activities. This engagement has also improved Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) provision.

The Youth Council has well-established productive relationships with senior officers and with elected members. The Youth Council achieved the 2010 Philip Lawrence Award for the contributions they make in ensuring that young people have a voice in Neath Port Talbot.

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Good

Support for school improvement: Good

Support for school improvement is good. The local authority has improved the rigour of its processes to monitor, support and challenge all schools and to intervene where there is cause for concern.

The authority provides elected members and schools with a very good range of data and good quality training in its use. Officers increasingly use this data well to track pupils' progress, identify under-attainment and then target support and intervention effectively. As a result the authority is improving the rigour of its challenge to schools to make sure that pupils' standards continue to improve.

Officers carry out a well-structured programme of monitoring visits and school reviews thereby using a range of first-hand evidence well to identify areas for improvement. They provide schools with useful written reviews of these visits. However, reviews do not yet consistently evaluate enough the quality of leadership and management in schools. The authority uses its knowledge of schools well to identify a small number of schools for extended support and acts on this knowledge to help them improve.

The authority has effective strategies to improve schools' performance, which address local and national priorities well. There are very good initiatives to improve literacy with a strong emphasis on reading. Support for numeracy is not as well developed. The authority provides very good support for the implementation of the Foundation Phase and has made good progress in partnership with schools and further education colleges in improving choice and opportunity for 14 to 19-year-olds. Support for Welsh as a first and second language is good.

Teacher assessments of the core subjects at the end of each key stage are not moderated consistently enough between schools to make sure that they accurately reflect pupils' achievement.

The authority provides good support and training for leaders and managers at all levels in schools and for governing bodies. Officers make sure that annual performance reports are presented to all governing bodies.

Support for additional learning needs: Excellent

Support for additional learning needs (ALN) is excellent. The authority has successfully built upon the outstanding practice identified in the 2008 Estyn inspection.

Schools confirm that, despite increasing levels of need, the authority is very successful in strengthening its capacity to effectively support a wide range of ALN; this is achieved through excellent quality partnership working. There is very good collaboration between the special schools to provide a range of effective support, advice and training to mainstream schools across the authority.

The local authority has been very successful in building the capacity of schools to support a wide range of ALN needs, despite decreasing levels of funding.

The use of all resources is regularly reviewed and evaluated, in conjunction with schools, to ensure the best outcomes possible for pupils. The authority buys in speech and language therapy to meet demand. Formal feedback reports from schools show that this support is effective.

There are also very good links between education and health services, with the result that support for mainstream teachers is very effective in areas such as visual impairment, hearing impairment and autistic spectrum disorder.

Resources for ALN are regularly and jointly evaluated to ensure the best possible outcomes for pupils. This is sector leading practice.

Data is used well to monitor the profile of ALN needs. This has resulted in additional provision for autism and behavioural difficulties, and an increase in special school places. The numbers of out of county placements have considerably reduced over the last few years. This is as a result of extended specialist provision within the local authority. Ninety-five point five percent of pupils with statements are educated within Neath Port Talbot, compared to national average of 91%. Excellent quality training and support are in place for all aspects of ALN. All areas of the service are responsive to the needs of schools, pupils and parents.

Excellent arrangements are in place to monitor provision and outcomes for pupils in the special schools and learning support centres. Outcomes are systematically used to inform practice. Analysis of ALN pupil achievement data shows that most pupils achieve at or above expected levels.

The authority carries out its statutory functions very efficiently; clear entry and exit criteria are used appropriately to secure the provision that pupils require at all levels within the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. Excellent multi-agency working facilitates the early assessment of pupils' needs, with 9% of statements

relating to pre-school age children. All statements are currently completed within statutory timescales.

Good quality written information is provided for parents, including how to access advocacy services. ALN liaison officers work closely with parents, and a very high number of parents contribute to their child's statement. The number of appeals to the SEN tribunal is minimal.

Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing: Good

The promotion of social inclusion and wellbeing is good, and the authority continues to give a strong lead to this work.

The local authority has addressed issues about inclusion and wellbeing raised in the previous Estyn inspection well. Training for elected members about their corporate parenting role has improved. Improved outcomes for looked-after children (LAC) reflect effective partnership working between all relevant agencies. The authority meets its statutory duties for LAC well.

The authority effectively targets services to meet the identified needs of specific groups of vulnerable learners. These services include inclusion centres for key stage 3, the ENGAGE project for key stage 4 and the Children's Inclusion Project.

The authority uses school level data well in order to understand how provision impacts positively on the attendance, behaviour and attitudes of learners. However, the use of data by agencies in the Children and Young Peoples Partnership (CYPP) is less well developed. This means that the authority does not know enough about the impact of provision across the CYPP. However, partnership working within the authority is improving through projects such as the Children's Services System Review which gives very good prospects for new models of effective and efficient inter-agency working.

Careers Wales provide good quality services that learners can access easily. Careers Wales support Keeping in Touch (KIT) initiatives well and give good support to help young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

The maintained youth service has increased the range of opportunities for young people to gain accreditation for their work. However, across the wider youth provider network, opportunities to access accredited provision are too inconsistent. The authority does not have enough information to fully evaluate how successful youth support services provision is in developing young people's achievements and attainment.

The authority's processes and procedures for safeguarding, within education, are satisfactory.

Access and school places: Good

The authority has clear principles, based on improving the standard of provision and making schools 'fit for purpose' whilst ensuring the cost-effective use of public funds.

It uses these principles to help make effective decisions about the reduction of surplus places and school reorganisation.

These principles underpin the strategic school improvement programme (SSIP) that covers aspects of reorganisation, rationalisation and modernisation of schools in the authority, along with the decisions the authority makes under this programme. The SSIP has led to a series of decisions and proposals that are well attuned to the specific needs of young people and their communities. These range from the federation of a secondary and primary school to closure and merger proposals. Among current proposals, elected members have approved consultation on the establishment of a new secondary school to replace three existing comprehensive schools. This is good progress. The authority has a good and comprehensive set of asset management data for its school buildings, which is used well to inform the SSIP.

The authority has appropriate admissions procedures in place and is able to ensure that all parental school preferences are met.

Children who have been permanently excluded from a school are generally reintegrated into appropriate provision within a short period of time

Currently 98% of three-year-olds and 98.7% of four-year-olds access the authority's early years provision. The authority monitors and evaluates early years provision well through the use of appropriate questionnaires and visits by authority advisers. It carries out an appropriate audit of play provision. The authority works effectively with relevant partners to ensure that children and young people have access to a range of youth support services. However, it has not audited youth support services well enough and is therefore unable to identify whether there is an appropriate range of services.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?
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Good

Leadership: Good

Senior officers and elected members provide effective leadership and have a good understanding of performance and the priorities for improvement within the Education service. They are strongly committed to improving provision for all children and young people through ensuring that resources are deployed fairly and effectively. This is reflected in policy formation and decision-making.

There are clear, established strategic links between corporate and service plans and policies. The vision for the education service is clear and shared by officers and members, and reinforced by good communication with schools. Plans and priorities take account of national and local priorities, based on a thorough analysis of local needs.

Significant investment has been secured to progress key development priorities, such as the re-structuring of education in the Afan Valley and protecting schools budgets by 1% for 2011-2012.

Quality improvement: Good

The authority produced a lengthy and detailed self-evaluation report drawing on a wide range of evidence. However, it contained too much description and not enough analysis of impact. In spite of this, self-evaluation procedures are well-established. The evaluation process is undertaken well at project and service level and the authority consults widely. Current self-evaluation arrangements allow officers within services to clearly identify strengths and areas for development. While there is a lack of consistency across service areas, the authority has a good track record of following up reviews with specified actions. This has resulted in better service support and delivery in special educational needs provision and the Behaviour service.

Systematic use of data informs the work with schools well and underpins initiatives, for example on literacy, behaviour and surplus places. The authority has effective arrangements to listen to children and young people, with particularly good systems for elected members and senior officers to hear their concerns.

There is a strong focus on involving all staff in self-evaluation, and staff feel ownership of change and development. Programme and project management are generally sound, although performance management arrangements are not fully developed. The authority has recently refined its approaches to system review and performance management. These focus appropriately on outcomes and on clear performance information to monitor effectiveness. This approach is already delivering savings and early indications suggest improved performance management.

The authority has a strong commitment to professional learning communities (PLCs) and plays a full role in the work of the regional consortium. In defining its involvement in these PLCs, the authority maintains a consistent focus on promoting a shared culture around clearly defined objectives.

In a relatively short time, the authority has made promising progress against many of the shortcomings identified in recent inspection reports, but in a very few cases progress has been too slow, particularly in partnership working for youth support services as identified in the 2008 Estyn report.

The capacity and capability of the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee to provide an effective role in service improvement are gradually developing. The committee has a good level of awareness of the work of the education service and the performance of the authority's schools. Recent corporate initiatives have helped the committee's forward work programme to be more balanced as it begins to participate in policy development and scrutiny reviews. However, the committee's work programme is still too heavily influenced by officers and cabinet members for it to hold them to account robustly.

Partnership working: Good

Links between strategic partnerships are good.

Partners from statutory agencies clearly understand their roles and responsibilities within the CYPP. They regularly scrutinise CYPP matters, challenge practice and agree decisions on future direction. These arrangements are well established. In the past, the Partnership has focused too much on developing provision without prioritising impact, but there is an improving picture in this respect.

The CYPP works very effectively with some partners to ensure that children and young people have access to a range of youth support services. However, the CYPP does not have an up-to-date map of all partners. It has been unable to audit these systematically and therefore cannot always identify whether an appropriate range of services exists. There is some inconsistency in planning, monitoring and evaluating the work of youth support services. However, there is now a useful management information system in place within the statutory youth service to address this.

Partnership working within the 14-19 Network is good. It is securing wider opportunities and positive outcomes for learners through greater collaboration. The partnership is developing further through increasing representation from work-based learning providers.

A particular strength of partnership working is the range of very good collaboration with a range of agencies to support learners with ALN and those who are looked after by the local authority.

The authority plays an active and influential role in the work undertaken by the regional consortium of authorities. This includes improving schools' self-evaluation, more widespread and better focused sharing of data, promoting the development of learning communities and more frequent and more effective sharing of expertise.

Resource management: Good

The authority has sound financial management with a good record of achieving its revenue budget. It has a well-established forward financial plan, with a transformation programme and service reviews being carried out to achieve efficiencies. Service reviews consider different ways of achieving the desired outcomes. A recent service review of school transport has identified potential annual savings of £954,000.

Elected members have traditionally given education a high priority in the allocation of financial resources. However, over the last six years, education spending has fallen in comparison to other council services, because of cost pressures on other parts of the corporate budget. Elected members have taken steps to address this over the last two years by passing on Revenue Support Grant increases directly to schools' budgets. Further priority has been given to schools by agreeing that any savings achieved through the SSIP programme will be retained within the education budget. A high proportion of the schools budget is delegated to individual schools.

The authority is revising the funding of individual schools to better reflect their needs. It has also introduced new service level agreements for primary schools, so that the level of service provided by the council and the associated cost are more

transparent. A shared bursar service provided by the authority has proved particularly popular, with the take-up increasing from nine to 35 schools over the last two years.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

Alun Morgan HMI	Reporting Inspector
Mererid Stone HMI	Deputy Reporting Inspector
Alun Connick HMI	Team Inspector
Farrukh Khan HMI	Team Inspector
Angharad Reed HMI	Team Inspector
Jane Taylor HMI	Team Inspector
Farrukh Khan HMI	Team Inspector
Ian MacKinder	WAO
Louise Fleet	WAO
Marc Forster	Peer Inspector
Aled Evans	Nominee
Maggie Turford	AD-Moderator

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