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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

**Gwynedd Council
Council Offices
Shirehall Street
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March 2013

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:

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Context

Gwynedd is located in north west Wales. The total population is 121,523.

In Gwynedd, 65.4% of people over the age of three say they can speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 19%.

The employment rate in Gwynedd was 69.5% compared to the Wales average of 67.3% (year ending December 2012). There were 14.5% of children working in workless households.

Of the working population in Gwynedd, 8.8% have no qualifications, which is lower than the Wales average of 10.6%.

The percentage of pupils of compulsory school age eligible for free school meals is 13.6% which is lower than 19.3% nationally. This level of eligibility is the 4th lowest in Wales (PLASC 2012). Only 4% of the 75 areas in Gwynedd are now in the 10% most deprived area in Wales (WIMD 2011).

As of 31 March 2012, Gwynedd had 195 children being looked after by the authority. There were 50 children on the Child Protection register.

Ethnic minorities account for 1.9% of the population, lower than the Wales average of 4.2% (year ending 31 December 2012)

Monetary context

The Council set a budget of £220.6 million (without counting grants) for all its services in 2012-2013, which is about 2.2% higher than the Welsh Government's Standard Expenditure Assessment.

Within this budget, an education budget of £87million was set. This is equivalent to £5,216 per pupil, namely the third highest among authorities in Wales. There has been an increase of 0.3%, which is a little higher than the average for Wales, in the education budget, in comparison with the budget for 2011-2012.

Although the increase in the education budget was small, a significant increase was seen in schools' devolved budgets in 2012-2013 as a result of decentralising money that was managed centrally in the past, and because of an increase in grants. As a result, primary school budgets per pupil rose to the third highest in Wales on average, whilst secondary school budgets are the second highest in Wales. Welsh Government figures indicate that the authority devolves 80.4% of its entire budget to schools. There has been a significant increase in the proportion devolved and it is now close to the Wales average of 81%.

Summary

Overall judgement: Adequate

The local authority's Education Services for children and Young people are adequate because:

- performance at key stage 4 does not compare well to that of similar schools in other authorities across Wales;
- attendance in too many secondary schools is in the lower quartiles in comparison with similar schools on the free school-meal benchmarks;
- the authority's arrangements for supporting and challenging schools are not robust enough and have not had enough impact on improving outcomes;
- the authority has not made enough progress in the management and governance of safeguarding; and
- the number and proportion of surplus places in Gwynedd's schools, in both the primary and secondary sectors, remain amongst the highest in Wales.

However:

- at key stage 3, performance against the core subject indicator is the best in Wales;
- In 2012 no Gwynedd learners left school without any recognised qualification. This is the best in performance in Wales against this indicator;
- the authority's language policy is successful in ensuring good progression in the proportion of pupils studying Welsh first language across the key stages and many pupils succeed in attaining a GCSE pass at grades A*-C in Welsh first language at the end of key stage 4;
- the youth service has succeeded well in increasing the number of young people who gain accredited units or qualifications, and in promoting apprenticeships, entrepreneurship and learning pathways;
- a number of well-established partnerships contribute extensively to the offer of experiences for children and young people including partnerships within the council and those of the council with the, health board, social services, police, youth support services and education and training providers; and
- the authority's corporate financial leadership is strong. The authority manages resources well in order to deal with reductions in its revenue budget.

Capacity to improve: Adequate

The local authority has adequate prospects for improvement because:

- until recently, corporate leaders and elected members have been slow to address a number of key areas for improvement and to ensure appropriate progress across the authority's education services for children and young people; and
- at a departmental level, the planning of services is weak and there is a lack of focus on measurable outcomes.

However:

- the portfolio holder, the lead education officer and the council's senior officers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the local authority's services for children and young people. They have demonstrated a willingness to take difficult decisions in respect of school rationalisation and take firm steps to act upon their commitment to improve standards;
- where the authority has identified areas for improvement and adopted these as corporate 'transformational projects', there are detailed planning arrangements, rigorous performance management procedures and clear progress;
- the council's new governance structure has enabled the officers to confirm decisions and act in a more timely fashion;
- the new scrutiny arrangements have improved the work and influence of the scrutiny committee and the full council. As a result, the council has demonstrated that it is able to drive improvement in priority areas; and
- the authority has ensured complete or at least appropriate progress in relation to each of the recommendations made in Estyn's previous inspections.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve safeguarding by ensuring that procedures and policies within the council are clearly understood by all who work for the authority and are regularly updated and disseminated
- R2 Raise standards in key stage 4 by targeting underperforming departments in low performing secondary schools more robustly
- R3 Monitor and challenge all schools and use the full powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in underperforming schools
- R4 Continue to develop and implement the authority's present strategies to improve attendance in secondary schools
- R5 Improve the quality of self-evaluation, and the implementation of improvement plans and performance management procedures within the education department
- R6 Continue to implement plans to reduce surplus places

What happens next?

Gwynedd Council will draw up an action plan which shows how it is going to address the recommendations within 50 days of receiving the report. Estyn will monitor any progress of the recommendations.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Adequate

Standards: Adequate

The proportion of learners in Gwynedd who are eligible for free school meals is amongst the lowest in Wales (4th). When these low levels of deprivation are taken into account, performance is average in primary schools. However, too many secondary schools are underperforming. The percentage of learners gaining the Foundation Phase indicator is above the average for Wales.

Performance in key stage 2 is also slightly better than the Wales average. The percentage of pupils gaining the core subject indicator at key stage 2 is higher than the Wales average, however too few learners achieve the higher levels. In key stage 3, the percentage of pupils achieving the core subject indicator is the best in Wales. However, performance on the majority of indicators at the end of key stage 4 did not improve as much as the rest of Wales in 2012.

When compared to similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks for 2012 performance in primary schools is only average in the Foundation Phase and in key stage 2. In key stage 3 performance is good, with one half of secondary schools in the top quarter and no schools in the bottom quarter. However performance at key stage 4 is below average overall with too many schools in the bottom quarter on most of the main indicators. This has been the picture over the last four years.

The Welsh Government sets benchmarks for an authority's performance in key stages 3 and 4 based on free-school-meal entitlement. Gwynedd has met the key stage 3 benchmark each year for the last four years and has met four of the possible eight benchmarks in key stage 4. It has not met the benchmark for the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics in any of the last four years.

In 2012 no Gwynedd learners left school without any recognised qualification. This is the best performance in Wales against this indicator. In 2012 the gap in performance between pupils entitled to free school meals and other pupils was less than the national average in key stages 2, 3 and 4. Generally particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, attain at their expected levels or better.

The authority has introduced a reading test across all its schools. These tests indicate that learners overall perform slightly better in Welsh than English and that learners in receipt of free school meals and boys perform less well than others. At the end of primary education, three quarters of learners achieve functional literacy. This is about average when compared with other authorities.

The number of entries at GCSE for Welsh first language is high when compared with other authorities. There is good progression in Welsh first language between key stages and late-comers to Welsh-medium education make very good progress on leaving short-term intensive provision. Standards are good across key stages and

the percentage of learners achieving the higher levels in key stages 2 and 3 are higher than the Wales average. Many pupils succeed in attaining an A*-C grade in Welsh first language at GCSE at the end of key stage 4. Many young people being helped by the youth service attain well on a wide range of non-formal qualifications.

Wellbeing: Adequate

Learners participate well in a range of activities that contribute towards improving their wellbeing. Children and young people develop their understanding of the importance of nurturing safe and healthy attitudes well through a variety of projects. Gwynedd children and young people's participation in national sports development programmes are among the highest in Wales against all measures. Pupils' attendance in primary schools in Gwynedd is good and compares well with similar authorities, with a third of schools being in the top quarter compared to similar schools in terms of the free school meals benchmarks. However, in 2011–2012, attendance in half of the secondary schools was in the lowest quarter compared with similar schools. Four schools have been in the lowest quarter for the past four years and one for the past three. This is a significant shortcoming. Vulnerable pupils' attendance is consistently good.

The rate of permanent exclusions in secondary schools has been reducing over the last three years although there was a significant increase in 2011-2012. Fixed-term exclusions of five days or less are among the lowest in Wales, and exclusions of six days or more are below the Wales average. However, the average number of days lost to fixed term exclusions is too high and does not compare well with other authorities in Wales.

The percentage of Year 11 leavers who are not in education, employment or training in 2012 is lower than the Wales average. However the pace of reduction over the last four years has been slower than the Wales average. The percentage of young people who remain in full-time education post-16 has increased significantly in 2012 and is above the Wales average.

Children and young people take part in a number of fora and other means to promote opportunities for them to express their opinions on a community and county level.

Key Question 2: How good is provision?	Adequate
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Support for School Improvement: Unsatisfactory

The authority has been slow to challenge underperformance in schools. It has not used its full range of powers to address the lack of progress in underperforming schools, even after these schools have received support. As a result, Estyn has identified over half the schools inspected since September 2010 as requiring follow-up activity. Six schools are in the category of being in need of significant improvement (SI).

The authority now has a partnership agreement with its schools that results in the provision of differentiated support and challenge, based on the needs of individual schools. However, arrangements for quality assuring the work of officers are not fully

effective and, as a result, the quality of support and challenge is inconsistent. In a minority of cases where officers challenge effectively, there is a clear impact on standards of teaching, quality of self-assessment and pupils' outcomes improve. In a few cases, this work has supported a minority of weaker schools to help them improve.

Suitable procedures are in place for analysing school performance, which enables officers to identify needs and underperformance appropriately. The range of curricular support for schools is extensive. However, the authority does not always make the best use of performance data to target this support effectively enough. The standard of officers' reports on the progress of secondary schools is consistently good.

However, the quality of these reports is inconsistent in the primary sector. The authority has suitable arrangements for developing the role of headteachers, middle managers, senior leaders and governors. However weak leadership has been a cause of concern in a minority of the schools inspected during this cycle but the authority has been slow to tackle this issue. These school leaders do not respond positively enough to these arrangements and the authority has been reluctant to tackle this issue and to hold these headteachers to account.

Recently, the authority has had an improved focus on developing governors' roles in identifying and addressing specific cases of underperformance. However, it is too early to measure their impact on the quality of leadership in schools.

Support for Additional Learning Needs: Good

The authority has a clear understanding of its strengths and areas for development in relation to its additional learning needs (ALN), and has made several important changes over recent years. This includes closing the units for pupils with general learning difficulties and developing a team of specialist teachers who support pupils in mainstream schools. As a result of this change, more pupils now receive specialist support and pupils with additional learning needs can attend their local schools.

The authority works effectively with partners to identify and assess the needs of children with additional learning needs at an early stage. It has clear criteria for accessing additional support and schools understand their responsibilities in terms of addressing the needs of pupils with additional learning needs. For example, before applying for additional support, schools are required to provide robust evidence of interventions that they have put in place and the impact of these on pupil outcomes. In addition, effective multi-agency assessment of young children ensures that appropriate support and resources can be put in place as soon as they start full-time education.

The percentage of statements completed within statutory timescales is consistently high. The number of appeals to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales over the past three years has been low. The authority provides good support for the parents of children who are undergoing statutory assessment. Parents have access to relevant training and the authority works very well with SNAP Cymru support agency to seek the views of parents, through questionnaires and focus groups. The

authority works well with its partners to provide effective specialist support for pupils with additional learning needs. This includes support for pupils with complex needs from the well established outreach services. Schools and parents value these services highly.

The authority also works well with partners to provide a comprehensive programme of training for schools. In addition, schools benefit from training that is tailored to their particular needs. The authority uses ALN data effectively to track pupil progress, monitor the impact of interventions on pupil outcomes and challenge schools. It analyses data well and uses this information effectively to plan services. The authority meets its statutory requirements in relation to pupils with additional learning needs well.

Promoting Social Inclusion and wellbeing: Adequate

The local authority and its partners co-operate well to plan and deliver a programme of services to support vulnerable families. Through a programme of targeted activities, children and young people are given good opportunities to improve their skills, behaviour and health, and then prepare themselves for the world of work. For example, the Gwynedd Healthy Schools Scheme works well to raise awareness and provide activities to improve children and young people's health and fitness.

Officers in the education department work well with nearly all schools to improve pupils' behaviour and to reduce exclusions. They use data effectively to identify where intervention is needed. For example, a dedicated strategy is in operation in one secondary school which has historically seen a high number of exclusions. This has resulted in positive short-term improvements, although the authority did not put these measures in place quickly enough.

Different organisations and agencies use data well to plan the support provided to vulnerable young people, but they do not always monitor and evaluate these plans rigorously enough to measure their impact on individuals' wellbeing. Therefore they do not know whether these initiatives are effective.

The Counselling Service co-operates effectively with the county's secondary schools and provides a dedicated provision and service for vulnerable pupils and pupils with additional learning needs.

Recently, the authority has begun to address the challenge of improving secondary school attendance. A clear, systematic process has now been agreed with schools which has led to positive initial outcomes. However, the authority has been slow to tackle persistent low attendance in a few of its secondary schools.

The youth service has succeeded well in increasing the number of young people who come into contact with the service over recent years. It has succeeded well in increasing the number of young people who gain accredited units or qualifications, and in promoting apprenticeships, entrepreneurship and learning pathways. The service is generally, well organised and learners are supported effectively.

The authority has implemented a scheme which has succeeded in bringing partners together to target learners who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), or who are at risk of becoming NEET. Youth workers, welfare officers and learning coaches offer good support to improve young people's attendance, motivation and attainment.

The authority has appropriate arrangements to ensure that safeguarding procedures are sound in schools. However, procedures to ensure a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities for child protection and safeguarding at a corporate level and between departments within the local authority are not clearly understood. As a result, the authority's safeguarding arrangements do not meet the statutory requirements and are a cause for concern.

Access and school places: Adequate

The number and proportion of surplus places in Gwynedd's schools, in both primary and secondary schools, remains amongst the highest in Wales. This position has deteriorated in recent years and a further decline in secondary pupil numbers is predicted. The pace of change in addressing this issues has been slow and the council had not given sufficient priority to school reorganisation.

However, since the last inspection, the authority has begun to tackle this issue more rigorously and to take difficult decisions to rationalise school places. Officers have developed a comprehensive methodology to evaluate the sufficiency of the authority's schools and to inform options for the rationalisation of provision for the future. This framework has promoting standards as a key criteria when considering school rationalisation and has been formally adopted by the Council. The Council's approved 21st Century Schools Band A Programme includes rationalisation and investment projects. The programme has good information and data on the condition and suitability of its school buildings which enables the Council to prioritise capital investment appropriately.

There is a sufficient supply of nursery places across the county, in schools and in commissioned non-maintained settings, and this is monitored regularly to ensure access for all. The quality of provision is generally good. The council evaluates the standard of provision well across all nursery settings, supports staff and deals promptly with instances of underperformance. The Gwynedd Ni resource offers a good range of information to parents, carers and families.

Young people benefit from an appropriate range of youth support services, which are developing through the implementation of a five-year strategic plan. The service has commissioned provision appropriately from the independent sector. The service integrates well with schools and is embracing opportunities to target support to individual young people through the Team Around the Family service. The service has worked well alongside the economic regeneration department to promote apprenticeships, entrepreneurship and learning pathways which not only reflect personal interests but also local labour market needs.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Adequate

Leadership: Adequate

Corporate leaders and elected members have been slow to identify a number of key areas for improvement and to ensure appropriate progress across the authority's education services for children and young people. During the past year, the council's governance structure has changed, enabling the council to confirm decisions and act in a more timely fashion. In addition, new scrutiny arrangements have refined the work and influence of the scrutiny committee and the full council.

Currently, the corporate leaders and key elected members have a clear understanding of the challenges, the strengths and areas for development within the local authority. There is also a stronger political will to take difficult decisions in order to promote improvement, as evidenced by the recent rationalisation of primary schools in the south of the county.

Where the authority has identified areas for improvement and adopted these as corporate 'transformational projects', there are detailed planning arrangements and rigorous performance management. This has led to appropriate progress in restructuring schools and targeting support for vulnerable families. In addition, the authority has given a robust strategic and operational lead to the principle of promoting the Welsh language in education and in the community and it has set high expectations in its language policy. There is good progression in the percentage following Welsh first language across the key stages and this has been supported by very effective action in language centres to enable pupils to acquire appropriate language skills.

However, apart from these transformational priorities, at a departmental level planning is weak. For example, there is a lack of focus on measurable outcomes and insufficient detail in the education department's plans to enable leaders and managers to hold officers to account. As a result important work, including school improvement, has slipped.

The authority has developed effective commissioning procedures, both internally and externally for specific resources for example in developing its support for vulnerable families. The process has improved accountability and these procedures are now at the heart of all aspects of the council's work. The lead education officer and the council's senior corporate officers have led this change in culture and have taken firm steps to act upon the commitment to improve standards.

Quality improvement: Adequate

The authority has an appropriate policy statement with clear guidance on performance management principles and procedures. The policy gives an overview of the self-evaluation processes and these enable elected members and senior managers to make more effective use of performance indicators to monitor progress against milestones on a regular basis, and to take appropriate remedial action.

Strategic planning now ensures that the authority focuses on improving outcomes.

This has enabled officers to drive improvement in key areas for example the school reorganisation change programme. However this has been a recent development.

The self-evaluation report is comprehensive and offers a balanced evaluation of all the council's work in relation to the inspection framework. However, until recently, the council's continuous self-evaluation processes have not been incisive and clear enough to identify strengths and weaknesses consistently across services, for example in areas around school improvement and safeguarding.

At a corporate level, the authority has appropriate procedures for managing the performance of individual officers. The authority has recently established a delivery panel which enables the elected members to hold regular discussions with senior officers about how it meets its priorities.

The education department does not comply fully with corporate procedures and some key aspects are underdeveloped, such as evaluating performance against expectations and specifying actions which will lead to improvement. As a result, there are gaps in the self-evaluation and operational planning processes. These shortcomings prevent departmental officers from understanding the full impact of their work and from setting appropriate priorities.

The authority has completed actions or made appropriate progress in relation to each of the recommendations made in Estyn's previous inspections. This includes good progress in reducing school budget surpluses; ensuring a clear strategy and commitment to reduce surplus places; improving the role of scrutiny; improving the provision for pupils with behavioural issues; and planning for youth support services.

Partnership working: Adequate

The authority has clear aims and objectives for working in partnership. There is a good level of co-operation between Gwynedd and Anglesey local authority to establish a Local Service Board. However, as yet, the partnership has not agreed on its strategic priorities and the current Local Service Board has not focused sufficiently on the impact of all of the partners' work on outcomes for children and young people.

A number of well-established partnerships contribute extensively to experiences for children and young people within and outside the council. These include partnerships with the health board, social services, police, youth support services and education and training providers.

A post-16 education consortium has been formed between secondary schools in Gwynedd, the council and Llandrillo Menai further education college to develop post-16 education across the area. However, progress since Estyn's area inspection in 2006 has been too slow, although arrangements have recently been agreed to expand opportunities for learners, make post-16 education more cost effective and avoid duplication of courses.

The Children and Young People's Partnership co-ordinates a wide range of learning experiences for children and young people effectively. The authority has mapped this provision appropriately. The partnership has clear principles and objectives in

the 'Improving Gwynedd Together' strategy. The partnership has procedures for monitoring and funding projects for children and young people, including monitoring meetings and annual reports. Where the authority has identified the partnership work as a corporate priority, there are appropriate quality assurance procedures which hold partners to account effectively. However, these procedures are not consistently applied to all the partnerships. Also the partnership does not have enough information about how it should be contributing to towards young people's outcomes to ensure that it delivers strategic priorities.

Resource management: Adequate

The authority's corporate financial leadership is strong. The authority manages resources well in order to address increasing reductions in its revenue budget. The financial planning process highlights risks and makes clear forecasts in terms of the authority's expenditure. Prudent and realistic decisions are made in order to set budgets which, despite the need for savings, allow the authority to increase expenditure in corporate priority areas. On the whole, the authority has a successful record of working within its budget and some education budgets such as additional learning needs, which have overspent in the past, are now in order.

The authority's expenditure on education shows its commitment to this area. The budget for the current year is the third highest in Wales. In line with Welsh Government requirements, there has been an appropriate increase in schools' devolved budgets in 2012-2013.

The authority has attracted significant grant funding for projects to promote inclusion and to build new schools over the next five years. There has been a history of significant slippage in terms of completing capital projects, although this has improved recently.

Although class sizes are small on average across the county, some larger and medium-sized primary schools continue to maintain classes that are too large. The authority worked innovatively in partnership with all primary schools to address this problem by jointly funding an 'internal grant' scheme, which is administered fairly and transparently.

The relatively high cost of the education service reflects the cost of maintaining small secondary and primary schools and a very high proportion of empty places. The authority was criticised in Estyn's inspection report in 2009 for the high level of reserves which schools were keeping at the end of the year. Recently, the Finance Forum decided on appropriate thresholds for surpluses, holding to account the four schools whose reserves exceeded the threshold. However, the authority has been too slow to respond to this issue and school surpluses remain very high compared with other authorities.

Considering the adequate standards and quality of much of the provision, the education services for children and young people offer adequate value for money.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

Clive Phillips	Reporting Inspector
Betsan O'Connor	Deputy
Helen Morgan-Rees	Team Inspector
Caroline Rees	Team Inspector
Cefin Campbell	Team Inspector
Huw Watkins	Team Inspector
Huw Lloyd Jones	Wales Audit Office
Aled Meredudd Evans	Peer Inspector
Robert Sully	Peer Inspector
Owen Owens	Nominee

Copies of the report

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Glossary of terms

National Curriculum

Expected National Curriculum levels

- By the end of the key stage 1, at the age of seven, learners are expected to reach level 2 and the more able to reach level 3.
- By the end of the key stage 2, at the age of eleven, learners are expected to reach level 4 and the more able to reach level 5.
- By the end of the key stage 3, at the age of fourteen, learners are expected to reach level 5 and the more able to reach level 6 or level 7.

Core subject indicator in all key stages

The core subject indicator relates to the expected performance in English or Welsh first language, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum. Learners must gain at least the expected level in either English or Welsh first language together with mathematics and science to gain the core subject indicator.

External examinations at key stage 4 or post-16

Core subject indicator – as above.

Level 1 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade D to G.

The Level 1 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grades D to G.

Level 2 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics – learners must have gained level 2 qualifications in English or Welsh first language and in mathematics as part of their threshold.

Level 3 qualification – the equivalent of an A level at A* to C.

The Level 3 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to two A levels at grade A* to E.

The **average wider points score** includes all external qualifications approved for use in Wales at the relevant age – for example at age 16 or 18. To calculate this, the total points gained by all learners in the cohort is divided by the number of learners.

The **capped average points score** only includes the best eight results for each pupil from all qualifications approved for use in Wales at age 16.

All-Wales Core Data sets

Schools and local authorities may refer to performance relative to their family of schools. These families of schools have been created to enable schools to compare their performance to similar schools across Wales. Families include schools with similar proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals, living in 20% most deprived areas of Wales, having special education needs at school action plus or statemented and with English as an additional language acquisition less than competent.