

Mr Dilwyn Williams
Chief Executive
Gwynedd Council
Council Offices
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05 February 2015

Dear Mr Williams,

Estyn Monitoring Visit 2 - 5 December 2014

Following Estyn's inspection of education services for children and young people in March 2013, it was identified that the authority required follow-up activity in the form of Estyn monitoring. As a result, a monitoring plan was agreed upon with your Estyn link inspectors. Monitoring visits were conducted on 12 - 13 March 2014 and 23 - 25 June 2014. A third monitoring visit, which was the final visit, was conducted from 2 - 5 December 2014. This letter records the final outcome of Estyn monitoring following the inspection.

In December 2014, Mr Iwan Roberts HMI led a team of three inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the remaining recommendations from the inspection, and to consider the authority's overall performance in line with its post-inspection action plan.

During the monitoring visit, the team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers and partner representatives. Inspectors scrutinised documents, including evidence of the progress made in relation to each of Estyn's recommendations.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported its findings to you as the chief executive, and to the leader of the council, the relevant cabinet members, the corporate director with responsibility for education and lifelong learning, the acting director of education, the chair of the relevant scrutiny committee and a representative of the Welsh Government.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

The authority quickly addressed the recommendations arising from the inspection in 2013. During a period of significant change among the senior managers of the

council and the education service, the authority has acted swiftly and decisively to plan for improvement. There is no evidence that a lack of capacity in during this period has been detrimental in terms of the ability of the council or the education service to fulfil their duties.

The council earmarked specific and additional resources to promote the implementation of the post-inspection action plan. These resources have helped the council to maintain appropriate momentum in terms of progress against most of this plan's targets.

Gwynedd Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations that arose from the inspection in March 2013.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is removing the authority from follow-up activity.

Recommendation 1: 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

This recommendation has been largely addressed

Estyn's inspection in March 2013 reported that the authority had not made sufficient progress in managing and governing safeguarding. There was no clear understanding of procedures to ensure that everyone understood their roles and responsibilities clearly for protecting and safeguarding children at corporate level and between departments within the local authority. As a result, the authority's safeguarding arrangements did not meet statutory requirements and were a cause for concern.

The authority has established effective arrangements for monitoring progress against the post-inspection action plan. Restructuring at head of service level, including creating a post for a head of children's services and supporting families, has strengthened the authority's corporate ability to establish, develop and manage its policies and procedures for safeguarding children and young people.

Since the inspection, the authority has prioritised safeguarding appropriately in its corporate strategy. This has set suitable foundations for the improvement process. Within a short time from the end of the inspection, the authority adopted an appropriate corporate safeguarding policy. This has led to developing and adopting corresponding policies for nearly all services. Plans and policies are revised regularly in order to ensure that they are up-to-date and meet statutory requirements.

In November 2013, the Council established a Strategic Safeguarding Children and Adults Panel to lead and ensure a strategic direction for the work. The panel includes the relevant lead members and senior officers. It is supported effectively by an operational panel that includes managers from all of the Council's departments. The work of these panels, which co-ordinate safeguarding work appropriately across the council's services, is a strength.

Through these panels, the authority has reviewed thoroughly its arrangements for training and raising the awareness of all of the council's staff of safeguarding issues in the context of providing services to children and young people. Arrangements for delivering these programmes continue, and specific arrangements to update all employees' training every three years have been programmed. Recently, the council has commissioned a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of its training programme in raising the awareness of members of staff of its procedures in relation to safeguarding. It is using the survey's findings to enable managers to identify groups of employees who require further training and is providing appropriately for them.

The panels have also co-ordinated work to achieve other safeguarding priorities effectively. They have developed suitable and consistent arrangements for recruiting and appointing across all services. An appropriate poster has been designed to inform employees and the public about the telephone line to use to report any concerns that they may have in relation to safeguarding.

More robust and consistent arrangements have been adopted within each department for recording incidents relating to safeguarding. Recently, procedures have been developed to co-ordinate information about safeguarding practice and findings across the authority's departments and services. This enables senior managers to examine information and identify any trends or behaviour patterns that may exist across the county. However, it is too early to evaluate the effect of these procedures.

Recommendation 2: Raise standards in key stage 4 by targeting underperforming departments in low performing secondary schools more robustly

This recommendation has been partly addressed

In Estyn's inspection report in 2013, it was identified that performance in key stage 4 was lower than average and that too many schools were in the bottom quarter for most of the main indicators. This had been the case over the four years prior to the inspection.

Following the inspection in 2013, the authority identified six secondary schools in which performance in key stage 4 was a cause for concern. Following purposeful meetings between officers of the authority, the headteacher and chair of governors at each school, individual actions were agreed. A network was established for school management teams, which is facilitated and supported by officers from the regional school improvement service (GwE). Over the period since the inspection, the network has identified a suitable range of development needs and has arranged meetings and beneficial workshops to address them. The sessions have included members of other school management teams from within the authority and beyond to promote effective practice. The sessions have focused on improving aspects of school leadership and management, such as self-evaluation arrangements, improvement plans and procedures for tracking pupils' progress.

In order to meet the specific needs of subject departments that are underperforming in the six secondary schools, the authority has commissioned external expertise

which in the main has been effective. For example, a former deputy from a neighbouring authority has worked with one school on literacy, and a former mathematics advisor has worked with another school. Extended training has been arranged for a group of middle managers. This develops and strengthens their leadership and managerial skills in areas such as data analysis, self-evaluation, developing systems to track the progress of groups of pupils and promoting high expectations. They share these skills effectively with their colleagues in their school. There are appropriate arrangements to develop school-to-school support, and there are some worthwhile arrangements in place to pair schools and departments to promote good practice.

In response to the Scrutiny Committee's report on the quality of education in September 2013, the authority has established the Promoting Quality Project for secondary schools. In January 2014, a deputy headteacher was seconded on a part-time basis to lead the work, and the secondment became full-time in September 2014. The project supports developments to improve the quality of leadership and to raise standards in secondary schools effectively, covering a broad range of areas that have been identified for improvement.

In 2013, the authority met or exceeded all of the Welsh Government's performance indicators for key stage 4, on the basis of the number of pupils entitled to free school meals. This included meeting the benchmark for level 2 including mathematics and Welsh or English for the first time in five years. From 2012 to 2014, improvement in the percentage of pupils attaining this indicator was better than the average for Wales and the county in each of the six schools targeted by the authority following the inspection in March 2013. There was also an increase in the performance of the majority of other secondary schools in the county. However, too many schools remain in the bottom quarter for most of the main indicators for key stage 4.

Recommendation 3: Monitor and challenge all schools and use the full powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in underperforming schools

This recommendation has been partly addressed

The system of monitoring and challenging schools has been strengthened appropriately in the period since the inspection. Early evidence indicates that challenge advisers are challenging school leaders purposefully and, in most cases, they know their schools well.

The authority's officers, GwE staff and the cabinet member meet every other week to discuss relevant issues, which include giving appropriate consideration to schools that are underperforming. They share their understanding of the nature of the challenges and the actions needed to support those schools. The challenge advisers who are linked to the underperforming schools also attend in order to give first-hand evidence to the group. The headteachers of these schools are invited to a meeting with the head of education services and the cabinet member to discuss their improvement plans. These plans are monitored appropriately by the head of education services in the subsequent period to ensure that these schools make appropriate progress. During the last 18 months, officers from the authority have

visited two schools that are a cause for concern due to their performance over a sustained period of time. One of these visits followed an Estyn inspection of the school. Both schools have made appropriate progress to date.

In addition, education officers and GwE staff conduct joint visits to underperforming schools in order to scrutinise the school's work in more detail and understand the context and the challenges that they are facing. These arrangements are at an early stage.

Recently, the authority's officers and elected members have clarified the process for using their powers to address underperforming schools. Headteachers are clear about this process. The authority has sent a statutory official warning notice to one school due to a financial issue. However, the authority has been reluctant to intervene formally in underperforming schools. The authority has not made enough use of its statutory powers to address underachievement in specific schools.

Recommendation 4: Continue to develop and implement the authority's present strategies to improve attendance in secondary schools

The recommendation has been largely addressed

In 2011-2012, attendance in half of the secondary schools in Gwynedd was in the bottom quarter in comparison with similar schools. Four schools had been in the bottom quarter for four consecutive years, and one for three consecutive years. This was identified as an important shortcoming by the inspection team in 2013. The inspection report also identified that the authority had begun to address the challenge of improving attendance in secondary schools and that a clear and systematic process had been agreed with schools that had led to positive initial outcomes. However, the authority had been slow to address the consistently low attendance in a few of its secondary schools.

Since the inspection, the council and the secondary schools have designated improving attendance as a priority area. The council has worked effectively with the secondary schools' management teams to promote attendance and address absences. The council has appointed an acting officer to lead action in this area, and the work is progressing effectively.

In June 2013, officers conducted meetings with secondary headteachers to consider attendance rates at the schools, and a number of elements which required improvement and consistency were identified. As a result, the authority and secondary schools have worked together well to put a number of new procedures in place. The authority devised clear and practical guidelines and policies which have given specific direction to action in the schools.

The education welfare officers' work procedure has changed and they are now based more in the schools rather than in a central office. As a result, they have a direct relationship with the families of pupils who are absent from school frequently. They review attendance and absences weekly and respond early to cases that require attention. There is an appropriate system in place to monitor pupils' attendance.

However, the authority is not identifying patterns in the absence of specific groups of pupils over a period including those who are entitled to free school meals.

The authority now reviews provision for pupils who are absent frequently, and has worked well with schools to introduce a range of intervention programmes and suitable vocational courses. This is beginning to have a positive effect on the attendance of many of these pupils.

The attendance rate for every secondary school in the authority has increased over the last two years. Attendance in the majority of secondary schools in Gwynedd is now higher than average compared with similar schools.

The number of exclusions is amongst the lowest in Wales. However, the average number of days lost to fixed term exclusions remains is still too high in comparison with other Welsh authorities.

Recommendation 5: Improve the quality of self-evaluation, and the implementation of improvement plans and performance management procedures within the education department

This recommendation has been partly addressed

In our inspection report in 2013, it was identified that the council's continuous self-evaluation processes had not been explicit and clear enough to identify strengths and weaknesses consistently across services, for example in areas relating to school improvement and safeguarding. It was also noted that the education department did not comply fully with corporate procedures, and that some key aspects had not been developed sufficiently, such as evaluating performance against expectations and setting actions that lead to improvement. As a result, there were gaps in the self-evaluation and action planning processes. These shortcomings prevented departmental officers from understanding their work fully, and from setting appropriate priorities.

On the whole, performance management procedures, self-evaluation and improvement plans in the education department have been strengthened since the inspection. Lines of accountability from the department to the council are clearer, and there is now a more direct link from corporate priorities to the education department's priorities.

The education department's measures are monitored every quarter by the council's achievement panel, which is chaired by the cabinet member. The officer who has specific responsibility for the measures reports on these, and if there are any slippages, the officer is challenged and held to account more effectively by members of the achievement panel. If the panel judges that there are specific risks or a slippage against the measures, that element is escalated to corporate level. As a result, progress against these measures is scrutinised much more carefully and levels of accountability are more robust.

Self-evaluation occurs on several levels at the council and, overall, these processes have improved since the inspection. Often, the council will commission officers to

submit a self-evaluation report on a specific project in order to consider the effectiveness of action and ensure value for money. In addition, the education department evaluates the effectiveness of specific areas of the service regularly. As a result, risks are identified and are given appropriate attention. An officer has been appointed to provide guidance on developing a more effective performance management system within the education department. There are clear measures for the department's priorities and a systematic reporting process. Individuals have been appointed to be responsible for specific measures, and officers in the education department are clearer about their responsibility for specific measures.

Although the education department's self-evaluation reports now follow corporate procedures, the information provided to the senior officers and elected members does not always identify weaknesses within the service accurately enough. For example, reports do not identify the local authority's failure to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for leadership and management in a pupil referral unit. Also, the report that is submitted exaggerates positive aspects of the authority's performance at the expense of some less positive aspects. As a result, senior officers and elected members do not receive all of the information that they need to hold the education department to account effectively

Recommendation 6: Continue to implement plans to reduce surplus places

This recommendation has been largely addressed

Since the inspection in March 2013, the authority has worked effectively to implement a number of priorities of the 'Excellent Primary Education for Children in Gwynedd' strategy. Implementing a plan to reorganise schools in the Berwyn catchment area and closing a primary school in the Botwnnog catchment area have removed 376 surplus places within the county. A plan to merge three primary schools in Arfon in a new building in September 2015 has been agreed and adopted. This will remove 97 surplus places. A proposed plan to re-model Ysgol Glancegin will lead to approximately one hundred surplus places being removed.

The authority is currently consulting on a plan to reorganise the educational provision in the Gader catchment area, and is in the second stage of the reorganisation of schools in the Berwyn catchment area. A report on the first of these plans is due to be presented to the council's cabinet in January 2015. If they are realised, the council's schemes anticipate that these plans will remove approximately 650 surplus places across primary and secondary schools by September 2017.

In addition to the above plans, the authority has undertaken comprehensive arrangements to update information about capacity and use of space within schools. This work provides up-to-date data for reassessing capacity and the number of surplus places. The work that has been completed to date suggests a further reduction in the number of surplus places across the county's schools.

The next steps

Your link inspector will continue their work with the authority, in their usual link role.

I will send a copy of this letter to the Welsh Government and the Wales Audit Office, for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Wales Audit Office
Gwynedd Council's Director of Education