

Mr Bryn Parry-Jones
Chief Executive
Pembrokeshire County Council
County Hall
Haverfordwest
Pembrokeshire
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20 June 2014

Dear Mr Parry-Jones

Estyn monitoring visit, 3-6 June 2014

Following Estyn's inspection of education services for children and young people in October 2012, the authority was identified as requiring special measures. A monitoring plan was subsequently agreed with your Estyn link inspectors, and the first monitoring visit took place from 6 to 8 November 2013. The second and final monitoring visit took place from 3 to 6 June 2014. This letter records the final outcomes of Estyn's post-inspection monitoring.

In June 2014, Mererid Stone HMI led a team of four inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the remaining four of the seven recommendations arising from the October 2012 inspection. The team also considered the overall performance of the authority against its post-inspection action plan.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers and headteachers. Inspectors scrutinised documentation, including evidence on the progress made on each of Estyn's recommendations.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported their findings to you, as the chief executive, and to the leader of the council, key elected members and senior officers.

Pembrokeshire County Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of October 2012. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the local authority is no longer in need of special measures and is removing it from further follow-up activity.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

During and immediately after the inspection in October 2012, the authority acted quickly and decisively to plan for change and this has resulted in significant improvements. The chief executive, leader and senior officers took difficult and sensitive decisions to remove barriers to progress in order to bring about the necessary improvement.

These decisions were implemented carefully and have resulted in a complete restructure within the Pembrokeshire Children and Schools Service. A new management team is working closely together as a cohesive group to embed change. The authority now engages well with the regional consortium. Joint working arrangements with regional partners have strengthened the authority's capacity to challenge and support its schools.

There is a significant change in culture within the authority demonstrated through greater openness and transparency. The authority's vision and expectation for its education services are communicated clearly to schools and other partners. Officers and elected members have shown a willingness to work constructively with inspection, audit and regulatory bodies to identify and address shortcomings. They demonstrate a firm commitment to implement change and have an appetite for further improvement.

Recommendation 1

Continue to strengthen arrangements for safeguarding and the oversight of them by elected members and officers, including the handling of cases of alleged professional abuse

This recommendation is largely addressed.

Since October 2012 the authority has made excellent progress to transform arrangements for safeguarding in all its education services and schools.

The strong leadership and clear vision of key elected members and senior officers ensure that the needs of children and young people are central to the authority's robust safeguarding arrangements. Elected members are fully involved and committed to this process. Elected members and the director of children and schools have worked well together to resolve difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff in social services. This has enabled officers to implement better safeguarding arrangements, including those for the handling of cases of alleged professional abuse. The addition of a 'Local Authority Designated Officer' (LADO) has further enhanced the authority's oversight of allegations of professional abuse and accountability for responding appropriately.

The authority has created an 'Integrated Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service' to provide robust structures and systems. This new service makes sure that there is a consistent approach to safeguarding children and young people and means that systems no longer rely on the presence of any one individual for effective implementation. There are clear guidelines to address safeguarding issues in a timely, efficient and proportionate manner.

Information-sharing at all levels is a significant strength of the new system. The head of children's services is fully informed about all current safeguarding issues within the authority and the progress being made to resolve these. Staff understand clearly that the designated officer for safeguarding acts as a single point of contact and advice for any referral. The human resources officer within the integrated service manages the conduct of all professional abuse strategy meetings, not only those for education-related incidents. An electronic system monitors and records all steps in the investigation process and alerts officers to any information held on individuals, for example by social services. There is a good range of checks in place, such as the strategy meeting, the completion of risk assessments and independent quality assurance on all cases by internal audit.

Schools now receive high-quality support, which includes clear guidelines, for all aspects of safeguarding. All schools have completed the authority's safeguarding health checks. These consist of a thorough review by officers of all safeguarding arrangements in the school and wider aspects of wellbeing. As a result, school staff and governing bodies are more aware of how to deal appropriately with safeguarding issues and have the confidence to take responsibility for any such issues that arise. This was not previously the case. Schools now openly discuss any concerns over safeguarding with the authority in the knowledge that these will be treated seriously and a thorough investigation will result, in line with the new guidance. The authority has appropriately addressed any issues highlighted through the health checks and is planning for the second cycle of these checks. The good practice in implementing these health checks has now been disseminated to Carmarthenshire schools through the regional hub working. To further strengthen the support to schools, the authority is developing a safeguarding self-evaluation toolkit for schools.

The safeguarding overview and scrutiny committee provides good support and challenge to the cabinet member for safeguarding and to officers. The committee has overseen the establishment of a task and finish group to look at safe recruitment. This led to the implementation of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for all school governors and greater access to good-quality training to deal effectively with incidents of difficult behaviour. In addition, the authority has provided clear guidance to improve the interview and appointments process for all new school staff. The authority holds a central register, which records details of individual Criminal Records Bureau or DBS checks and dates and details of safeguarding training undertaken by all staff.

The authority has recently established a junior Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) to work in conjunction with the statutory LSCB board. This is giving children and young people, including those who are vulnerable, a greater say in issues of particular concern to them. The voice of children is highly valued within the authority and the Council has formally adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, only the second local authority in Wales to do so.

As a result of the improvements to safeguarding arrangements within the authority, the head of human resources now takes a lead role in a Welsh Local Government Association working group to produce good practice guidance on safe recruitment for use by other local authorities across Wales.

The director for children and schools chairs the Regional Safeguarding Children's Board. This provides helpful opportunities for the authority to compare its safeguarding practice with others across the region through peer challenge and the use of benchmarks.

Safeguarding practice in the authority is very strong, and the authority is sharing its practice with other local authorities across Wales.

Recommendation 2

Continue to work to raise standards at all key stages and for all groups of learners

This recommendation is partly addressed.

After the inspection in 2012 the authority, in collaboration with partners across the region, developed a coherent strategy to improve outcomes for learners in its schools. There is now a culture of openness and transparency between the authority and its schools and a greater willingness to challenge and be challenged.

System leaders know well the performance of their schools and discussions with schools focus strongly on standards. Officers analyse thoroughly a good range of data and use all relevant analyses, including detailed data on the performance of every pupil, to challenge underperformance and to plan effective interventions. Data is used well to raise teachers' expectations for their pupils, including the most able and those with additional learning needs, and to make sure that targets for attainment are sufficiently challenging.

Officers carry out a comprehensive programme of visits to schools, which focus appropriately on those schools that need to improve the most. These visits include a rigorous review of standards in the autumn followed by a detailed scrutiny of pupils' work to monitor classroom standards. Senior officers also carry out a 'Challenge Visit' to secondary schools in the spring to track progress against agreed targets in key stage 4 and to hold senior leadership teams to account for improvement. Headteachers are clear about the priorities they are working to and their responsibilities in raising standards.

Senior officers appropriately recognise that the quality of teaching must improve in many schools if improvements in performance are to be sustainable. Officers have introduced a range of actions to challenge and support senior leaders and classroom teachers. These include effective classroom-based support, constructive use of lead practitioners and working groups to identify best practice. The teaching and learning strategy is being shared across the region.

The authority has introduced a series of rigorous interventions to moderate and challenge teacher assessments in the Foundation Phase and in key stages 2 and 3. Officers have held useful meetings across the authority to share clear expectations with schools and strengthen standardisation and moderation practices. Officers also systematically compared teachers' assessments to outcomes from national reading and numeracy tests for every pupil and challenged schools where they identified possible anomalies. This data was also used to identify and support individual pupils who are underperforming compared to expectations based on standardised scores.

The authority has implemented comprehensive strategies for improvement in both key stages 2 and 4. In 2013 performance in these key stages declined in Pembrokeshire. This was because performance in both English and mathematics either did not improve or declined. The authority quickly identified schools where there is underperformance in these two subjects and put interventions in place. This includes good curriculum support from subject system leaders and regular network meetings to improve the skills of subject leaders. In many of these schools, teaching and planning are improving and teachers have higher expectations for their pupils and use data more effectively.

Provisional figures for 2014 indicate that performance has improved in the Foundation Phase by over two percentage points and in key stage 2 by more than three percentage points. This is a bigger rise than in previous years. The percentage of pupils gaining level 5 has risen in all core subjects in key stage 2. In key stage 3, the percentage of pupils attaining the higher levels has also improved overall.

Key stage 4 results for 2014 are not yet known, so it is too soon to know whether the authority's improvement strategies have significantly improved outcomes in external examinations.

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 is largely addressed.

Since the last inspection the authority has significantly improved the rigour of challenge and support to its schools. It has collaborated well with its regional partners, particularly within the school improvement hub, in order to make improvements at a good pace.

The authority has substantially strengthened the team of system leaders. These officers now understand their role well and have clear guidelines to support their work. The principal system leader has introduced increasingly effective processes to develop officers' skills and to quality assure their work. As a result, managers can quickly identify and address any underperformance and the consistency of challenge brought to schools is improving. The authority also commissions appropriate expert support to add capacity and expertise.

System leaders now use the regional framework more rigorously to categorise schools according to risk and to target appropriate interventions, although judgements on leadership and management in a few schools remain too generous. School leaders have a clear understanding of the category their school is in, the support they will receive as a result and their role in bringing about improvement. Subject system leaders also robustly categorise Welsh first language, English and mathematics departments in secondary schools in order to hold middle leaders to account.

The quality of written records of reviews and other visits to schools has improved significantly. These notes are generally evaluative, clearly identify areas for improvement and set appropriate targets and timescales. They set out actions for the school and for the authority in order to bring about improvement. Where a school is in follow-up after an Estyn inspection, notes of visit clearly evaluate the school's progress in addressing recommendations. The quality of reports provided before inspection is improving and increasingly these match the judgements of the inspection team, although in a recent secondary inspection areas for improvement were not all identified.

The authority has increasingly rigorous arrangements to hold schools to account for improvement. All secondary schools and underperforming primary schools are robustly challenged by the children and families overview and scrutiny committee. The authority has very recently introduced 'Family of Schools Monitoring Groups', where all headteachers and chairs of governors in each cluster meet senior officers and key elected members to discuss the performance of their schools. This ensures that chairs of governing bodies understand well not only the performance of their own school but also its comparison to others in the cluster.

Schools identified as causing concern have detailed action plans outlining clearly the actions to be taken. These plans, and the progress the school makes in implementing them, will now be monitored and challenged thoroughly by senior officers as well as the system leader. Schools identified by Estyn as requiring significant improvement or special measures are monitored and supported rigorously. Two secondary schools in significant improvement have monthly improvement boards to continuously drive improvement. Senior officers are consistently involved in the challenge to these schools. All primary schools identified in these categories have now been removed from follow-up by Estyn.

The authority is increasingly using its full powers to make sure that underperforming schools improve quickly enough. Three schools have received warning notices to improve and, where necessary, additional governors have been appointed in these schools. The director of children and schools and other senior officers have robustly tackled issues with leadership in schools and have taken difficult decisions to deal with underperformance. The authority has identified several schools where intervention by officers has already improved the school sufficiently for them not to become causes for concern at inspection.

The authority has begun to implement a programme to improve the quality of middle management in secondary schools. This is initially targeted at core subjects in recognition of the need to improve standards in these areas. Officers have provided valuable training for governors to help them understand the performance of their schools. System leaders attend governing body meetings in priority schools. They also provide written reports for the governing body. As a result, governors understand better the issues facing their schools and the areas in need of improvement.

Recommendation 4

Implement an appropriate strategy to identify and meet demand for Welsh-medium education

This recommendation is partly addressed.

Within the last year the authority has redefined its principles for primary and secondary school organisation. These guiding principles, and the associated evaluation criteria, have led to a more robust approach and an evidence-based rationale for change. This provides a valuable basis for the council to reach informed conclusions about the quality of provision and the need to add, remove or relocate school places. Although this approach is at an early stage of implementation, it has been used appropriately by officers when developing recent school organisation proposals.

Elected members and senior officers have taken difficult decisions that have resulted in a number of school organisation consultations, and approval for school amalgamations, closures, and the building of new schools. Officers have effectively managed these individual projects and engaged well with stakeholders such as headteachers, governors, parents and the wider public.

Through the revision of its Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), the authority's strategy to secure sufficient provision for Welsh-medium education in the long term is more robust. This strategy is an integral consideration within school re-organisation consultations and proposals. An example is the agreement to establish a Welsh-medium primary school in the south of the county to meet demand for Welsh-medium education in that particular area. The authority has begun to consult on proposals that include options to increase opportunity for Welsh-medium learning elsewhere, such as in the preliminary consultation in the St David's area. However, generally, the implementation of the strategy has been slower in the secondary sector.

Over the last 12 months, a Welsh-medium education forum, chaired by the cabinet member for the Welsh language, has appropriately overseen the implementation of the WESP. Recently, the authority has measured demand for Welsh-medium education through parental surveys in two specific areas. This has been useful in beginning to identify the level of need for revising provision in these areas. The results of these surveys are scheduled to be presented to the scrutiny committee within the next few weeks.

In line with the objectives in the WESP, the authority has scheduled a wider review of secondary school Welsh-medium provision for the autumn. A full council meeting will consider the outcome of this review in order to plan for the future. However, until the results of this review are analysed, the authority does not know whether it can fully meet the demand for Welsh-medium education in the secondary sector.

Recommendation 5

Continue to improve scrutiny arrangements so that elected members can challenge the performance of the authority's services, and its schools and safeguarding arrangements

This recommendation is largely addressed.

There has been significant improvement in the effectiveness of scrutiny by elected members in both the safeguarding committee and the children and families committee. Members bring a robust challenge to the leader and the cabinet and hold them to account well. They are well informed and rigorous in their questioning of officers and executive members. Meetings are more focused, with fewer presentations and more time for analysis and debate.

Scrutiny support officers work closely with members of committees to make sure that they fully understand the issues before them. Members have already benefited from a range of appropriate training to improve their skills. This has improved their confidence and capacity to participate fully in the scrutiny process. Further training is now planned in response to a useful survey of their needs.

The safeguarding scrutiny committee has made a strong contribution to the improvement in safeguarding practice in the children and schools service. It is now beginning to hold other services and partners to account for their safeguarding policies and procedures.

The director for children and schools is open and transparent in his dealings with scrutiny. Heads of service and other officers also support the committees well. As a result, the information provided to members has improved. The children and families committee now receives performance information on each school, enabling them to identify those that are underperforming. They have received training on how to analyse school data from officers and are able to challenge and hold school leaders to account for their schools' performance. Progress reports from schools causing concern are brought to the committee by officers. In addition, headteachers and chairs of governing bodies are called to scrutiny to present their inspection reports and explain their plans for improvement. The strong working relationship that the authority is developing with its schools has contributed to the success of this approach.

Members were involved well in developing the council's single integrated plan and also the action plan to address weaknesses identified in the Estyn inspection of education services.

The chairs of the safeguarding committee and the children and families committee work together well to ensure consistency and identify opportunities for joint scrutiny. In a joint meeting of the two scrutiny committees, the leader was held to account and challenged robustly about issues raised in critical reports by inspectorates. Members make effective use of task and finish groups, which bring clear recommendations for cabinet and have successfully influenced change. Examples of this are in implementing safer recruitment practices and in improving the recruitment and retention of social workers.

The good practice in these committees is now being used to improve scrutiny more widely across the council. Members are seeking to make further improvement, for example to be involved in the decision-making process earlier.

Recommendation 6

Make and implement a comprehensive and robust single planning process that identifies appropriate levels of accountability and performance management

This recommendation is largely addressed.

The work of the central 'Partnership and Scrutiny' support team brings a clear and consistent approach to all corporate and partnership planning. This team was initially established to secure effective systems for the local single integrated plan but is now influencing strategic planning arrangements more widely, including areas for improvement identified in the last inspection. The team works directly to the deputy chief executive and provides senior officer support to key strategic partnerships. This demonstrates well the value the authority gives to those partnerships involved in the single integrated plan. The team also makes sure that information for corporate management and elected members is controlled centrally. As a result, elected members have confidence in the reliability of information they receive through the team from service areas and partners.

The team has now strengthened further strategic planning arrangements. The single integrated plan has been reviewed and partnership activity is now more focused. As a result, partnership work concentrates appropriately on four areas where organisations can have the greatest impact by working together, for example reducing the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The authority has improved the structure of its strategic planning since the inspection in 2012. There is now a clear hierarchy of plans from the Local Service Board's single integrated plan, through the council's improvement plan, service improvement plans and team plans. The single integrated plan also aligns well with the regional education consortium business plan. These plans provide a coherent structure for setting objectives and targets that contribute to the new performance management system for monitoring progress. Individual performance appraisal objectives link well to the objectives outlined in service improvement plans. However, team plans do not always contain suitable measurable targets and success criteria.

An appropriate corporate performance management system has been developed. A helpful performance management framework was introduced in May 2013. This was trialled within the 'Partnership and Scrutiny' support team, as well as other corporate teams, and has since been rolled out across the authority. Managers have received appropriate training on the performance management process and now recognise the importance of ensuring good and effective performance management processes. This consistent approach to performance management has been used well to identify and address areas of underperformance.

Recommendation 7

Strengthen self-evaluation and planning to evaluate more systematically how services and partnership working are improving outcomes for learners

This recommendation is largely addressed.

The authority has significantly improved its approach to self-evaluation, developing a culture of openness and honesty about performance. The director for children and schools, along with his senior leadership team, leads by example in being robustly self-critical about performance within the directorate and by inviting constructive challenge about performance. Officers, including those in commissioned services, are expected to take a similar approach in their work and are fully supported to do so by senior managers.

The authority has good information to support self-evaluation. Most officers scrutinise performance data and other information rigorously to evaluate effectively the impact of specific actions and the performance of service areas. As a result, managers take appropriate mitigating action where necessary and are suitably focused when planning for improvement. Ongoing self-evaluation occurs effectively at senior leader level as well as service level.

Senior leaders have worked effectively with officers to improve the authority's knowledge of its schools, including the impact that external challenge, intervention and support have in schools. Senior leaders use this knowledge well to evaluate the performance of services and plan for improvement.

The authority has started a new annual cycle of self-evaluation. Although the first cycle has not yet been fully completed, the authority has drafted a useful evaluation of all aspects of education services for children and young people. Teams within the directorate have all contributed appropriately to the development of this report. Even in its current draft form, it is a clear improvement on previous reports that the authority produced. The authority recognises the need for the report to be refined further, including taking account of the views of stakeholders, in the next phase of its development.

For this monitoring visit, the authority produced a specific self-evaluation report on progress in addressing the seven recommendations from Estyn's inspection in 2012. This report generally offers an accurate view of progress, evaluating improvements but also noting areas that require further attention. The report is mainly consistent with Estyn's judgements as set out in this letter.

Evaluations of education performance feature in a range of other reports such as reports to scrutiny committees. The quality of evaluation in these reports is good and considerably better than in similar reports at the time of the previous inspection. In the Improvement Assessment letter of November 2013, Wales Audit Office stated that the "Improvement Review 2012/2013 evaluates the Council's success in achieving its improvement objectives and expresses its view clearly in a fair and balanced way".

Next steps

The authority should continue to work to raise standards at key stage 4 and to identify and meet demand for Welsh-medium education. Your link inspectors will continue their work with the authority, in their normal link role.

I am copying 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