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Chief Executive  
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council  
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1 August 2014

Dear Mr Merritt

### **Estyn monitoring visit 30 June – 3 July 2014**

Following Estyn's inspection of education services for children and young people in March 2012, the authority was identified as requiring follow-up through Estyn monitoring. A plan for follow-up visits was agreed with your Estyn link inspectors. The first follow-up visit took place on the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013, and the second monitoring visit took place from 31<sup>st</sup> March – 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014, with the third and final visit taking place from 30<sup>th</sup> June – 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2014. This letter records the outcomes of that final visit.

Gerard Kerslake HMI led a team of four inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the remaining two of the six recommendations arising from the Estyn inspection in March 2012, and to confirm that sustained progress is being made against the four recommendations previously considered.

The team held discussions with the cabinet member for education, scrutiny committee members, authority officers, headteachers, school governors, and senior managers from the Central South Consortium. 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, the leader of the council, the cabinet member for education, the director of education and lifelong learning, and other authority officers.

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of March 2012. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority is no longer in need of Estyn monitoring and is removing it from further follow-up activity.

## **Outcome of the monitoring visit**

Following Estyn's inspection in March 2012, the authority produced an appropriately detailed post-inspection action plan (PIAP) with clear incremental steps to achieve improvement in its education services for children and young people. Elected members and senior officers have demonstrated a clear commitment to taking difficult decisions to improve provision and using resources effectively. The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning's strong and effective leadership has been a key factor in this drive for improvement.

### **Recommendation 1: Raise standards in schools particularly in key stage 4**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Standards in schools are higher than they were at the time of the last inspection for all the main indicators in all key stages. When the performance of the authority's schools is compared with that of similar schools in Wales, based on the percentage eligible for free school meals, performance overall was slightly above average in 2013 in primary and secondary schools.

The authority met or exceeded the Welsh Government's expected benchmarks in all three indicators in 2013.

Performance in key stage 4 improved for all the main indicators in 2012 and again in 2013. The rate of improvement in 2013 was better than the Wales average. Based on recent indications from schools, taking into account qualifications already achieved, the authority is anticipating a significant improvement in the proportion of pupils who achieve the Level 2 threshold indicator including English or Welsh and mathematics from 46.3% in 2013 to 51.6% this summer, although this would be a little short of the authority's target of 53.4%.

The authority has high expectations of its schools. This is reflected in a local ambition that sets out expectations of standards by 2018. This is supported by challenging targets for the authority for 2014, 2015 and 2016, based on targets for each school. School targets are agreed following robust challenge from officers, who use data well to support this process.

The authority works effectively with the regional school improvement service to ensure that its own schools receive enough support and for the right purposes and helpfully provides additional resources, where it identifies a strong case for this. Most officers know schools very well, including the quality of leadership and management, and the director has an excellent overview of all schools, and in particular, schools causing concern. Schools are categorised appropriately through the regional school improvement service. Officers use a school's category to determine the level of support available to the school and work flexibly with schools to use resources effectively taking into account the school's context.

Officers from the regional school improvement service and the authority hold schools to account for their performance more effectively than at the time of the last inspection. Officers challenge schools robustly about their improvement plans,

including detailed 'statements of action' for schools causing concern. Most officers monitor performance rigorously at a level proportionate to the category of the school, with the director and cabinet member directly engaged in monitoring schools causing the greatest concern. Notes of visits carried out by officers from the regional school improvement service, along with reports on schools, are quality-assured appropriately by the authority. The authority requires all secondary schools to submit regular updates on predicted standards for Year 11 pupils based on their latest data. As well as providing an ongoing view of progress, this has also supported headteachers to hold middle leaders to account and know whether support and interventions are making an impact.

School improvement officers are working more collaboratively with those in services supporting social inclusion, wellbeing and additional learning needs, to ensure that a wider range of issues are taken into account when discussing a school's performance and its provision.

Many schools inspected since the authority's inspection have required follow-up. Current performance was judged to be adequate in half of these schools, and unsatisfactory in one, although the prospects for improvement were judged to be good in the majority of them. This reflects the increased focus of the authority in ensuring good leadership and management in its schools.

## **Recommendation 2: Improve attendance rates in all schools**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Since the last inspection in 2012, attendance has improved in both primary and secondary schools. Between 2011 and 2013, attendance in primary schools improved at a higher rate than the Wales average. It improved by 1 percentage point from 92.4% in 2011 to 93.4% in 2013. When compared to similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, attendance in 2013 is around average in primary schools.

Attendance in secondary schools improved at a similar rate to the Wales average between 2011 and 2013. It improved by 1.3 percentage points from 90.7% in 2011 to 92.0% in 2013. However, attendance by pupils who receive free school meals is below the average for Wales. The local authority has successfully reduced the level of persistent absentees from 10.2% in 2011 to 6.9% in 2013 (Wales: 8.7% to 6.2%) When compared to that in similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, attendance in secondary schools is below average with 37% (7) of schools in the bottom quarter and 58% (11) below average. Only 21% (4) of schools are in the top quarter and 42% (8) are above average overall.

The authority's unverified data for this current year indicates that attendance rates in both primary and secondary schools have continued to improve when compared with the same period last year.

The authority has taken robust steps to ensure that all schools use attendance codes consistently and accurately. The authority is holding headteachers to account effectively through their internal audit processes, resulting in more accurate



attendance data. However, the authority has not provided schools with a clear direction regarding the authorisation of term-time holidays and schools' approach to this issue is inconsistent. The authority has consulted stakeholders regarding a code of conduct for issuing fixed penalty notices for poor attendance and a 'zero tolerance' approach to authorising holidays in term time. It intends to issue guidance to schools in these areas in September 2014.

The authority has produced a useful strategy and toolkit for improving attendance, following consultation with headteachers and other stakeholders. Headteachers find the toolkit valuable and effective in outlining consistent procedures to help improve attendance.

The authority's schools have introduced various initiatives to improve attendance. These include good and effective rewards and sanctions systems, which schools apply consistently. The authority has provided appropriate training to governors on attendance issues. They have linked this training to safeguarding and have received positive feedback from governors. Governors have used this training well in governors meetings, for example by demonstrating a greater understanding and confidence in using attendance data.

The authority has delivered suitable public campaigns to raise parental awareness of the importance of good attendance. The authority has successfully recruited partners to help raise the profile of high attendance. For example, local businesses make positive contributions by offering prizes for good attendance in schools. They have also managed to secure advertising space on council fleet vehicles to promote the message of good attendance.

Since the last inspection, attendance data provided by the authority to schools and the Central South Consortium has improved considerably. Schools are able to use this data well in consultation with the attendance and wellbeing service to focus on areas of poor attendance.

Schools in consultation with the authority and the consortium set appropriately challenging targets to improve attendance. These are based on making sure that all schools aim above the median for their free-school-meal benchmark group. If a school is already above the median then targets are set to move them up into the next quarter within their free-school-meal benchmark group.

The authority's education and lifelong learning scrutiny committee has established a scrutiny attendance-working group, to scrutinise school attendance. This group produced a report, which made 32 recommendations to help improve attendance. All of these recommendations have been addressed appropriately.

### **Recommendation 3: Improve the evaluation and analyses of data across service areas and partnerships to drive improvements in outcomes for learners**

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority has put in place effective structures to support the ongoing improvements in data collection, analysis, and reporting. This includes an

improvement strategy, a project management board, and an 'Information and Systems Team' to collect, analyse and share data.

In early 2013, the authority undertook a robust 'Data and Information Governance Review'. The outcomes of this review clearly identified areas of good practice, and important areas for improvement, which endorsed the findings in Estyn's report, and provided clear detail about the changes needed. The authority has responded well to the findings of their internal review. It has also used its internal audit arrangements to analyse the quality of data collection at school level, and to hold schools to account for the accuracy of their record keeping. Consequently, the authority has improved the consistency of its data and improved the quality of its data reports.

The authority's Data Review Visits (DRVs) help officers, systems leaders and school managers have more informed conversations about pupils and their performance. Governing bodies' use of data is also improving, with a better understanding of how to interpret data, and how to use it for improvement purposes.

Schools are gaining confidence in the improved data collection systems. They are using both the authority's data packs and their own analysis of local data to identify more robustly issues around teaching and learning, progress of pupils including those with additional learning needs, and pupil attendance. Primary and secondary schools are sharing data more effectively and this is leading to better-targeted support for pupils as they transfer from key stage 2 to key stage 3.

Links between the authority's and Central South Consortium's data units are improving. The authority shares its school data reports with systems leaders so they can use these to inform their annual performance reviews. The authority is also working in partnership with a neighbouring authority to develop common data collection systems, and they are sharing their on-going evaluations of this with the consortium.

The authority now requires its schools to make better and more appropriate use of their pupil level data to target support before referring pupils to authority services, and additional learning needs (ALN) services in particular. Schools have to evidence what they have done before referrals are accepted. The Access and Inclusion service has improved how it uses data to better track ALN pupils, and to evaluate use of the Additional Needs Funding (ANF). For example, as a result of improved data analysis, the service is better able to identify trends in how schools manage behaviour and is able to target its support and challenge more appropriately. Consequently, the need for physical intervention and use of fixed term exclusions are dropping in those schools targeted.

The authority is also using data more effectively to improve services and outcomes in its partnership based work. This has helped the partnership to decommission a large number of services, and to monitor better the impact of those services it now funds. The authority and its partners have put in place a vulnerability profile mechanism, which effectively highlights young people who need additional help to keep them engaged in education, training, and employment.

Elected members are more confident in the quality of the information provided by the education department. This has helped scrutiny hold schools and officers more effectively to account.

**Recommendation 4: Use the full powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in schools**

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the inspection in 2012, the authority has strengthened its use of the powers it has available for the improvement in leadership and management in its schools. It has developed an integrated approach to underpin its school improvement strategy, which includes a revised and improved Partnership Agreement, and revised human resource and performance management policies and procedures. As a result, the respective responsibilities of schools, the authority and the Central South Consortium for school improvement are clearer, as well as the consequences for poor performance.

The authority, in partnership with the regional consortium, undertakes regular performance reviews of its schools. School review meetings make good use of the intelligence and data that the consortium has to evaluate how well a school manages pupil performance and standards; the quality of teaching and learning; finance; buildings; safeguarding pupils; and human resource issues.

The authority has increased the use of its intervention powers, and focused this on performance improvement, rather than simply imposing sanctions. Where there is under-performance, the authority now more robustly challenges its schools to improve. The authority informs its challenge with a clear evidence base, which leads to an agreed incremental plan for improvement and appropriate targeted support. For example, this support may include financial assistance to secure mentoring and support for the headteacher, curriculum managers and teachers and learning support assistants.

The use of powers has included formal meetings between the director and elected members with head teachers and chairs of governors. The authority has also issued formal warnings to head teachers and governing bodies where improvements have been too slow. Since the inspection in 2012, the authority has used its powers of intervention to hold 34 primary schools and 10 secondary schools to account more rigorously. In one recent case, the authority has appointed additional governors to the governing body of an underperforming school.

Following local authority notification to improve, most schools have responded well, and have demonstrated clear improvement against their agreed action plans. However, where there has been limited improvement the authority, headteachers, and governing bodies have appropriately escalated intervention to competency and capability procedures.

## **Recommendation 5: Reduce surplus places**

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority has a suitable strategic approach to school reorganisation, which includes their school organisation planning and governance delivery plan. This plan has clear links with the strategic business plan, which includes an objective for the removal of surplus places.

The authority has consulted effectively with key stakeholders in producing proposals for school reorganisation. The strategy has been well received by schools. The authority has supported headteachers involved in school reorganisation process well, involving them effectively in the planning process and taking good account of their views. Headteachers have a strong commitment to future reorganisation proposals. Since the inspection in 2012, elected members have taken difficult decisions regarding school reorganisation. They demonstrate a commitment to the whole school reorganisation process. There is a clear political will and a strong financial commitment to implement the 21st century schools programme.

The authority has firm plans in place to remove further surplus places in primary and in secondary schools. These plans include a comprehensive school modernisation strategy comprising of school closures, amalgamations and the creation of all-age schools. Since the inspection in 2012, the authority has reduced the number of primary schools with significant surplus capacity from 68 to 42 and has reduced the total number of surplus places in primary schools by 1,864. Another three infant schools are due to close in August 2014, which will further remove 271 surplus places. One primary school is due to close in August 2015, which will remove another 230 surplus places.

In secondary schools, surplus places have increased since the last inspection. However, it is projected that the closure of three secondary schools in August 2014 and a new school building, which is planned to open in April 2015, will reduce surplus places by 932.

The authority has projected, based on actual pupil numbers, that the rationalisation proposals will reduce surplus places to 21.5 % across secondary schools and 16.7 % across primary schools by September 2016.

## **Recommendation 6: Improve the rigour and the level of scrutiny and challenge across all services and partnerships**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Since the inspection in 2012, the authority has made steady progress in addressing this recommendation and is responding appropriately to the shortcomings identified in the inspection report. It is also taking good account of the improvement messages emerging from the current cross-Wales initiative to improve how local authorities undertake scrutiny functions.



The authority has reviewed the way its scrutiny committees work and is working well with external agencies and other local authorities to develop its improvement programme. Consequently, the authority has a better understanding of the challenges it faces to improve its scrutiny function and it has already put in place appropriate actions to address many of the underlying issues.

Scrutiny support officers have revised the training offered to scrutiny members. They are working well with scrutiny chairs to improve committee management skills. They are also working at improving the clarity of minutes, so they record better any outcomes arising from scrutiny meetings and use these more effectively to inform decisions and recommendations for action. Programmed pre-meetings have begun to improve members' preparation for meetings, which enables them to improve their challenge and interrogation of reports. The authority also now has an effective process in place to ensure the recommendations made by the education and lifelong learning scrutiny committee are followed up.

Scrutiny members' understanding of the technical aspects of education data and performance measures is improving. Committee members have received specific training on this. Also, the education and lifelong learning scrutiny committee have in partnership with the children's services scrutiny committee recently established a joint working group to undertake more detailed research into specific education issues in order to develop the expertise within the scrutiny committees.

The quality of the information officers provide in reports has improved. Reports are increasingly more focused, and contain a more robust evidence base. Where appropriate, scrutiny reports now include detailed information about individual schools performance and not just higher level, cross authority performance. These improvements are helping scrutiny members undertake their role more effectively.

The scrutiny of the educational outcomes arising from the work of Fframwaith<sup>1</sup> is also improving. Securing the appropriate level of scrutiny of this work by elected members was initially slow to progress. However, the education and lifelong learning scrutiny committee has recently taken the appropriate steps to improve the rigour of its scrutiny of this work.

Fframwaith is developing the systems necessary for it to address its important role in coordinating youth support services within the authority. It has a well-developed model in place to appropriately performance manage its commissioned services. It has also decommissioned projects that have not been able to identify clearly the need for their work or the outcomes of their interventions. As yet, Fframwaith has not rolled this model out across non-commissioned youth support services. However, the recent youth support services strategy provides the basis upon which they plan to develop this aspect.

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<sup>1</sup> Fframwaith is the Rhondda Cynon Taf Children and Young People's Partnership, which was established to promote local co-operation amongst agencies to improve the well-being of children, young people, and their families. The partnership consists of representatives from various different organisations which includes the Local Authority, Health, Voluntary and Statutory Sector, all of which provide services to children, young people and their families



Officers also regularly report education outcomes to the Local Service Board (LSB) and to the Regional Collaboration Board.

### **Next steps**

The authority should continue to work to raise standards across all key stages, and to improve attendance. It should also continue its work to improve how it undertakes its scrutiny functions, and develop Fframwaith further so that it undertakes its role effectively. 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