

Alison Ward  
Chief Executive  
Torfaen County Borough Council  
Civic Centre  
Pontypool  
NP4 6YB

January 2016

Dear Ms Ward

### **Estyn monitoring visit, 23-27 November 2015**

Following Estyn's inspection of Torfaen's education services for children and young people in October 2011, the authority was identified as requiring significant improvement. In February 2013, Estyn monitored the progress against the recommendations arising from the inspection in 2011 and judged that the authority had made insufficient progress. As a result, the authority was identified as requiring special measures.

A monitoring plan was subsequently agreed with your Estyn link inspectors, and monitoring visits took place in May 2014 and October 2014. We wrote to you with feedback following each of these visits and a final monitoring visit took place in November 2015. This letter reports the final outcome of Estyn's post-inspection monitoring.

Farrukh Khan HMI led a team of five inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the five recommendations arising from the inspection in 2011 and the two additional recommendations arising from the monitoring visit in 2013. Inspectors also looked at the shortcomings identified in the provision for additional learning needs (ALN).

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chair of the recovery board, the chief executive, senior officers and other relevant staff in the authority, headteachers and relevant staff working for the regional school improvement service, Education Achievement Service (EAS). Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of 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 other key personnel involved in our discussions.

## **Outcome of the monitoring visit**

Torfaen County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection in 2011 and full monitoring visit in 2013. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority no longer requires special measures and is removing it from further follow-up activity.

## **Background**

Following Estyn's monitoring visit in 2013 in which the authority was placed in special measures, the Welsh Ministers issued a direction to establish a Recovery Board ("the recovery board"). The role of the recovery board is to provide support and challenge to the authority as it addressed the Estyn recommendations. The direction stated that the authority should co-operate with the board and provided the board with reserve powers of direction.

Since the monitoring visit in 2013, the local authority has strengthened its education service. The head of education services is line managed by an assistant chief executive and supported by the additional appointments of a head of learning and a head of pupil support (ALN).

The authority established a Children and Young People's Improvement Board (CYPIB) in 2014. This board is intended appropriately to be the main governance structure for driving improvements in services for children and young people across all partners in Torfaen. It has senior membership representation at executive level from the local authority, its partners and stakeholders including a primary and a secondary headteacher.

The CYPIB, recovery board, elected members and senior officers of the authority have worked well together to build the authority's capacity to improve its education services for children and young people.

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

### **The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.**

Since the last full monitoring visit in February 2013, the local authority has consistently improved outcomes for its pupils at key stage 4. The rate of improvement in Torfaen has been faster than the rate of improvement across Wales in all the main headline indicators, although this has been from a very low base.

The Welsh Government sets benchmarks for an authority's performance in key stages 3 and 4 based on free-school-meal entitlement. The authority failed to meet any of its three benchmarked targets in 2015, having met one of its targets in both 2014 and 2013.

In 2015, overall performance for the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and Mathematics is just below the Welsh Government's benchmarks for performance based on free-school-meal entitlement. This is a marked improvement from the time of the original inspection.

The performance of the local authority's secondary schools when compared to similar schools based on eligibility for free school meals has improved at a faster rate than the Wales average. However, performance is below average across all headline indicators at key stage 4.

The progress that pupils make from primary school to the end of secondary school has improved in the headline indicators that include English or Welsh and mathematics, such as the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics. However, pupils' progress for the average capped points score remains significantly less than expected compared to similar pupils in Wales. This has been the case since the time of the original inspection.

The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved well at key stage 4 since 2012. In 2015, performance by this group of pupils in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and Mathematics is higher than the average for these pupils in Wales. Since the last inspection, the performance of girls and boys has generally increased at the same rate. However, in 2015, the gap in performance between girls and boys in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics has widened noticeably. This gap is now larger than that seen nationally. This is largely due to the weak performance by boys in English, which is four percentage points lower than that of boys in Wales. Performance by more able pupils is not strong with only just over one in eight pupils achieving 5 A\* or A grades at GCSE or equivalent.

At key stage 3, outcomes based on teacher assessments indicate that performance has generally improved since the last inspection. However, the local authority's own evaluation of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills indicate that standards are generally weak.

In 2011, Estyn reported that performance in Welsh second language in key stages 3 and 4 was weak. Since then teacher assessments at key stage 3 indicate good improvements. However, at key stage 4, despite modest improvements, the proportion of pupils gaining a grade C or better GCSE qualification remains low.

In the Foundation Phase and at key stage 2, outcomes based on teacher assessments have declined noticeably. This is predominantly as a result of the local authority's drive to improve the accuracy of teacher assessment in schools over the last year. However, despite the recalibration of teacher assessment, pupils' standards of literacy and numeracy remain weak.

The proportion of young people receiving a nationally accredited qualification through the local authority's youth support services has improved well.

## **Recommendation 2: Take action to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)**

### **The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.**

In 2011, Estyn judged that the numbers of Year 11 leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET) were not as good as Wales averages, and did not compare well to those of other similar authorities.

In 2013, Estyn judged that, from a very low base, the authority had made slow progress in reducing the number of young people not in education, training and employment. Inspectors noted that greater change and pace was required to bring about further improvements.

Over the past two years, the authority has acted well to prioritise this recommendation. The authority, through the leader, chief executive and assistant chief executive, has greatly improved its focus on young people who are NEET. As a result, there has been quicker progress to reduce the number of young people who are NEET.

The percentage of Year 11 leavers who are NEET has reduced since the monitoring visit in 2013, from 5.5% in 2012 to 2.2% in 2014. Unverified data suggests a further small reduction in 2015. This has moved the authority from being amongst the worst in Wales to being better than the Wales average. As a result of improved working with partners the local authority is better at identifying young people at risk of being NEET.

At key stage 2 the local authority appropriately identifies pupils who are at risk of disengaging with education through an enhanced transition model. The authority uses this model to monitor the progress of young people considered to be at risk during the move from primary to secondary school and ensure that these young people receive continued support. This has helped to reduce the rate of exclusions in Year 7. At key stage 3 and key stage 4, the Risk of NEETs Indicator (RONI) enables the authority and its partners to gather and analyse data more effectively. At post-16, the authority uses data from Careers Wales to identify clearly those learners at risk of being NEET.

As a result of this better identification, the authority has enhanced its co-ordination of support for young people as well as improving how it tracks young people receiving support. Partners ensure that there is a good range of suitable interventions and progression routes for young people, through the effective joint work of the Positive Pathways Group and the Keeping in Touch Group. These groups are held to account well by the Children and Young People's Improvement Board (CYPIB). The local authority has developed social clauses, which include recruitment targets, as part of contracts awarded by the local authority, such as for building work. These clauses include the development of 80 work experience opportunities and guaranteed interviews for vacancies. However, these clauses are not monitored closely enough to be able to fully demonstrate their impact.

The local authority provides useful six-monthly reports to the CYPIB, which highlight progress against the outcome indicators contained within the partnership framework. Overall, there is improved partnership working amongst the different agencies involved in supporting young people who are NEET, or at risk of becoming NEET. This has resulted in more young people getting good and timely support to keep them in education, employment or training.

### **R3 - Improve the quality and consistency of the evaluation of services to inform planning more effectively**

**The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.**

In 2011, Estyn judged that improving quality was adequate. This was because the self-evaluation report lacked detail, did not recognise well enough the progress the authority had made and did not identify areas for improvement. In addition, self-evaluation was not consistent across all education services.

In 2013, Estyn monitored the authority's progress against the recommendations made in the 2011 inspection report, and judged that this recommendation had not been addressed.

Since then, the authority has improved its arrangements for evaluating its performance. Officers have ensured that staff and elected members have a better understanding of performance data and, as a result, there is a clearer corporate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in the education service. The authority engages stakeholders better in its self-evaluation processes. For example, headteachers have a greater role in identifying areas that need improvement and in planning how to bring these improvements about. As a result, the working relationship between officers and schools has improved and there is now a collective approach to improving quality. For example, joint evaluation of teacher assessment in all phases has highlighted the need to improve this process and to ensure that assessments made at the end of the Foundation Phase, key stage 2 and key stage 3 are accurate. Following this work, schools, officers and elected members have a more realistic picture of pupil performance. In addition, more accurate identification of the levels at which pupils are working is allowing schools and the EAS to improve their services and identify more relevant interventions to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. However, the work to realign assessment is at an early stage and not all schools are fully engaged in the process. Senior officers and members have improved the system for monitoring team evaluations. This has resulted in increased challenge, particularly around the success criteria used to judge progress made. A pilot exercise involving an external consultant has been useful in refining service self-evaluation. As a result this process is now applied to the evaluation of all service plans, helping to bring consistency to self-evaluation across the authority.

As a result of these improved processes, the current self-evaluation report is an open and honest evaluation of the education service's work. The report generally identifies good features and priorities for improvement accurately. Officers use the information from these evaluations effectively to develop improvement plans with a

clear focus on improving outcomes. However, a few areas of the service's work, such as the full range of secondary school performance indicators, are not evaluated thoroughly. As a result, these measures do not feature as priorities in improvement plans for the education service.

#### **Recommendation 4: Improve the performance management of services to ensure a consistent approach in delivering improvements**

##### **The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.**

Since the monitoring visit in 2013, the authority has worked well with the recovery board to bring about significant change in performance management. As a result of recent restructuring at corporate and service level, the authority has greater capacity to manage education services. Relationships with schools have improved and the level of trust now enables mutual challenge. The executive member for education has a higher profile with all schools and partners. The council, its schools and partners share accountability for the outcomes of all children and young people. The EAS business plan now gives greater clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of the regional school improvement service and the local authority. The authority is working well with the EAS to ensure the business plan reflects more accurately the improvement priorities identified by the education service and the council's overview and scrutiny function. A principal challenge adviser leads the team of challenge advisers working with schools in Torfaen and the authority has appointed a head of learning whose role includes monitoring the quality and effectiveness of the EAS. This has resulted in better working relationships with schools and has strengthened the authority's ability to hold the EAS to account. Senior officers, elected members and partners have an improved understanding of performance across education services for children and young people. The Council has restructured its scrutiny portfolios to increase the focus on education. This includes a sub-committee to scrutinise both the performance of individual schools and the support schools receive from the EAS and the council's education service. Members of these committees have received effective training to challenge performance. As a result, they have become better informed and skilled in the analysis of school performance data and are able to challenge and hold services and officers to account more effectively. To date, all secondary schools and five primary schools have attended a meeting of the sub-committee.

Performance management processes are now more robust and better aligned through corporate, service, unit and individual staff levels. Work to embed both individual performance reviews and corporate performance assessment sessions in the council's corporate governance structure is progressing well. Individual performance reviews ensure that every member of staff has a better understanding of their role and responsibilities in relation to the authority's priorities. Corporate performance assessment sessions are held quarterly and these ensure that elected members question and challenge officers constructively to justify underperforming areas and identify areas of potential risk. The sessions result in a greater understanding of the key issues facing the council and collective ownership across the cabinet, senior leadership and officers of what needs to be done to address areas of concern.



**Recommendation 5: Implement effective governance arrangements for the work of the CYPP to ensure all services for children and young people in**

**Torfaen are managed appropriately.**

**The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.**

In 2011 Estyn judged that strategic partnership working was unsatisfactory. This was because the impact of the work of the Children and Young People's Partnership was not good enough, and the partnerships' evaluations of their own performance had only recently been introduced. The Children and Young People's Partnership did not know well enough the successes or shortcomings of a wide range of partnership activities. This meant that they were unable to plan for improvement or prioritise actions and resources well enough.

In 2013 Estyn monitored the authority's progress against the recommendations made in the 2011 inspection report, and judged that this particular recommendation had been partly met. At that time, the priorities for children and young people were identified clearly in the Local Service Board's draft single plan 'Torfaen Together'. However, it was not clear how well the implementation of actions against those priorities was strategically evaluated, or how well plans for improvement were developed. The Children and Young People's Partnership was disbanded, since its activities were included in the single plan.

Since then, the authority has recognised the need to re-establish a partnership structure to oversee delivery of the local service board's priorities for children and young people and so established the CYPIB. The CYPIB has clear and suitable terms of reference. There is an agreed partnership framework which includes an appropriate range of outcome indicators for each of the seven core aims. Partners make good use of a helpful outcome monitoring tool to identify where performance is below expectations and plan improvements.

The executive member for education, chief executive and assistant chief executive provide strong leadership and their involvement indicates the high profile and importance of the CYPIB. Their willingness to engage in honest discussions helps to establish a constructive and open culture within the CYPIB. All partners demonstrate a clear commitment to finding better ways of working together to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The CYPIB's early intervention and prevention strategy, 'Don't Walk On By', has had a positive impact on the way partners work together to support individual children and young people and their families. Partners are more consistently adopting a team around the family approach to their work. As a result, support is better co-ordinated and targeted at those in greatest need.

Educational outcomes have been a key priority for the CYPIB. The terms of reference identify their role to monitor progress and provide additional direction and support to ensure the performance of schools is improved. Partners have worked closely with the recovery board and the education service to improve their knowledge of education in Torfaen. There is a good understanding of key issues such as the need to ensure consistent teacher assessment and to improve literacy.

The CYPIB has helped to maintain a focus on educational improvement through regular updates and reports from the local authority and the regional school improvement service. Board members have provided effective challenge through robust discussion.

**Additional recommendation: Make sure that the arrangements for delivering school improvement services challenge and support all schools effectively, in order to improve quickly standards for all learners and those in secondary schools in particular**

**The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.**

Since the last full monitoring visit, the local authority has improved its arrangements for delivering school improvement services. Importantly, changes in key positions within the education service have led to vastly improved working relationships with schools. This has enabled open and honest discussions to take place across the local authority to tackle important issues, such as the reliability of teacher assessment. Furthermore, schools are now more involved in shaping and constructing policy with the local authority.

Local authority officers' understanding and use of performance data has improved. They use this information more effectively to prioritise the work of the authority as well as to monitor schools' performance and other important aspects, such as pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. However, overall, the local authority's evaluation of performance data across its secondary schools is not thorough enough. For example, the local authority has not evaluated important aspects such as performance in the average capped points score or the performance by more able pupils. Therefore, the local authority and its schools are not fully aware of important areas that need improving.

Since the monitoring visit in 2013, the local authority has improved the way in which it works with the EAS. There are now better arrangements in place to ensure commissioned services from the EAS meet the local authority's needs. In addition, the local authority has systems in place to quality assure the work being carried out in its schools. However, there are inconsistencies in quality assurance and the lack of availability of all documentation for school governors. Furthermore, support in priority areas such as literacy and numeracy has been slow to improve pupils' skills in these important areas.

Since the monitoring visit in 2013, a lower than average proportion of schools have been identified as needing follow-up after their inspections. In addition, the local authority has been largely successful at supporting schools to move quickly out of follow up. The quality of reports provided by the local authority to Estyn prior to school inspections has generally improved since the last monitoring visit.

The local authority has issued one statutory warning notice to a primary school since the monitoring visit in 2013. Following the warning letter, the local authority provided support to the school which resulted in improvements being made.



**Additional recommendation: Improve the use of outcome measures for self-evaluation and reporting by the education service, and partnership bodies in order to plan services better, to monitor performance more accurately, and to hold individual services more to account.**

**The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.**

In 2013 Estyn judged that the success measures used at service level did not enable managers to demonstrate sufficiently the impact of their actions on service outcomes or achievement of its priorities. As a result, Estyn gave an additional recommendation to the authority about improving the use of outcome measures for self-evaluation.

Since then, there is a more focused use of outcome measures in planning documents across the council. The CYPIB Partnership Framework contains relevant outcome indicators for each of its core aims. In addition, officers have prioritised areas for improvement in the education service plan and these include key tracking measures. As a result, senior leaders have a clearer understanding of priorities and attainment in the authority which has resulted in them being able to hold officers to account more effectively. However, these processes are relatively new and have not yet led to improved outcomes for learners in all performance indicators.

The commentary in the other recommendations above also contribute to demonstrating the satisfactory progress made by the authority in relation to this recommendation.

### **Provision for additional learning needs (ALN)**

Since the monitoring visit in 2013, the local authority commissioned a review of all ALN provision and made recommendations for improvements. This has led to the restructuring of the ALN service to include an appropriate focus on vulnerable groups and the appointment of an ALN link officer for each school. In addition, the local authority has delegated ALN funding to schools and there is now much closer working between the special school and schools with special needs resource bases. However, many of these developments are recent and it is too early to evaluate their impact.

### **Next steps**

Despite the overall progress being made by the authority, there are a number of important areas covered in our report that require further improvement. The authority should focus on evaluating its performance against a wider range of national benchmark indicators at key stage 3 and key stage 4. It should also prioritise the improvement of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across all key stages.

The recent work of the recovery board has helped guide the authority in its improvement work and the authority should consider ongoing engagement with external experts to ensure that the pace of improvement continues.

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 Auditor General for Wales for information.

Yours sincerely

**Clive Phillips**  
Assistant Director

cc Welsh Government  
Auditor General