



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales



**A report on education services in
Torfaen County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Pontypool
NP4 6YB**

Date of inspection: March 2022

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

This report is also available in Welsh.

About Torfaen County Borough Council

Torfaen County Borough Council has a total population of around 95,000. The local authority maintains 31 mainstream schools. There are 25 primary schools, including three that provide Welsh-medium education. There are six secondary schools, one of which is a Welsh-medium school. In addition, there is one special school and one pupil referral unit.

The chief executive took up his post in July 2021 and the chief education officer was appointed in 2012. The council leader has been in his role since December 2016 and the main portfolio holder for education services took up this position in 2016. The local authority's last inspection was in 2011.

Torfaen County Borough Council is one of five local authorities in the Education Achievement Service (EAS) consortium.

In 2021-2022, the Council's net education budget is around £96,000,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2021-2022 is £4,877, which is close to the average in Wales.

Inspectors take account of a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating outcomes and the quality of education services. They consider this information alongside information about the national population. Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Torfaen is noted below:

- Over a three-year average, 26% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, higher than the Wales average of 20%
- 11% of pupils aged 5 and over are fluent in Welsh, which is lower than the Wales average of 16%
- 6% of pupils aged 5 or over are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 13%
- 21% of pupils have special educational needs (SEN), just above the Wales average of 20%.
- (Please note this data is from January 2021, before changes to how SEN provision is allocated)
- 229 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2021, which is the highest rate in Wales

Summary

Senior leaders in Torfaen have recently collaborated with their partners to set out their shared ambition for all learners. This work has helped to strengthen relationships between local authority officers and school leaders and demonstrates a joint commitment to improving outcomes for pupils.

Performance in primary schools is generally sound overall, but the weak performance in secondary schools over time is a significant issue for the local authority. Work to address this and to improve pupils' outcomes has been too slow and causes concern for young people's educational attainment and well-being as well as their opportunities for future education, training and employment.

Senior leaders have a broad overview of the work of the education service, but they do not hold officers at all levels to account well enough or focus sufficiently well on the impact of their work. Officers report to elected members, including the scrutiny committee, regularly. However, the information they share does not enable elected members to hold the cabinet to account robustly to help to ensure the provision of effective education services.

Evaluation and improvement planning processes across the education directorate lack rigour. The service's self-evaluation is weak and officers do not evaluate the impact of their work well enough. This means that they do not identify important aspects of the service's work that need improvement. There is no clear link between self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. As a result of this, priorities for improvement are often too broad and lack precision, and officers do not set measurable targets and appropriate timescales against which they can evaluate progress. These weaknesses are evident in plans at all levels.

There are strengths within the access and engagement team including the delivery of school re-organisation plans. There are also notable examples of very strong practice in the youth service provision, but the planning and provision within the learning and pupil support teams are weaker. Priorities for the learning team do not focus sufficiently well on school improvement or hold the regional consortium to account and, as a result, there are pupils in Torfaen who have spent their entire secondary education in schools that cause concern. The pupil support service provides a range of helpful specialist support services but does not have a systematic approach to collecting and analysing information about its provision. Strategic planning for pupils with ALN is not comprehensive enough and does not include the breadth of provision for which the local authority is responsible.

Overall, leaders' lack of capacity to address long standing issues in secondary schools, and to evaluate their work accurately and bring about improvements swiftly, lead us to conclude that Torfaen is a local authority causing significant concern.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve outcomes for learners, particularly in secondary schools
- R2 Strengthen performance management
- R3 Strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning processes and the link between them
- R4 Improve strategic leadership of learning and ALN

What happens next

The provider will update their improvement plans to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will review the provider's progress through post inspection improvement conference and progress conferences. A monitoring visit will take place about 30 months after the publication of this report.

Main findings

Outcomes

We are unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes. This is due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the suspension of inspections of schools and most other education providers since March 2020. It is also due to the lack of data about outcomes that can be compared over time as the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded and affected most other data that we consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations.

Any evaluations that follow provide a context by reporting on outcomes before the pandemic or relate to more recent outcomes where the evidence base is valid and reliable.

Between September 2017 and March 2020, we inspected 12 primary schools and two secondary schools. We judged that standards were excellent in two primary schools, good in five primary schools and adequate in five primary schools. Of the two secondary schools, we judged standards to be adequate in one and unsatisfactory in the other. These judgements for standards in primary and secondary schools are weak compared to national findings from inspections during the same period.

The secondary school that was judged to have adequate standards was placed into Estyn review and later went into special measures, partly due to a decline in standards. In addition, one secondary school has been in special measures since 2017 after initially being placed into Estyn review in 2015. None of the 12 primary schools inspected were placed in a statutory follow-up category. One primary school was placed into the follow-up category of Estyn Review and has now been removed from follow-up.

Overall standards at the end of key stage 4 in the three years before the pandemic were low. Outcomes for pupils in Torfaen's secondary schools were variable and generally below those in similar schools. Standards of pupils that are eligible for free school meals improved in the three years before the pandemic and were broadly in line with national averages.

In the school inspections between 2017 and 2019, the proportion of schools that received a judgement of good or excellent for well-being and attitudes to learning was lower than the national average. Compared to national average, fewer pupils feel safe at school, and a lower proportion of pupils feel that there is someone they can talk to at school if they are worried or upset.

Between 2017 and 2019, attendance in Torfaen was generally in line with national averages, which is good when taking account of Torfaen's socio-economic context. However, the levels of persistent absence, particularly in secondary schools, increased during this period and were above the average for Wales.

Over time, rates of school exclusions are generally in line with national averages. Recently there has been a considerable reduction in exclusions for looked after children and other vulnerable pupils affected by significant trauma.

Children benefit from an extensive range of play services in Torfaen. The many vulnerable children who engage with these services develop their social skills through targeted play activities and participate in play sessions that help to reduce their anxiety. Young people's well-being is supported through a variety of youth service activities. For example, at the men's independent living group, young people gain confidence by developing their cooking skills and improving their ability to manage their personal finances. There are good examples of children and young people influencing decision-making within individual services and education providers, including in the youth service. The opportunities for children and young people to influence the local authority's strategic decisions are limited.

Through a range of national surveys, children and young people in Torfaen report that they are generally not as physically active as their peers, both in school and outside of school.

Education services

Under Inspection Area 2, Estyn sets local inspection questions that are relevant to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's current strategic priorities or result from information that Estyn has about education services in the local authority.

How effective are school improvement processes, in particular the work to improve the quality of teaching and school leadership?

The local authority has strengthened notably its relationships with schools. This has included working alongside them to navigate the challenges of the pandemic and supporting the well-being of staff and pupils in schools. As a result, professional dialogue between the local authority and its schools is more frequent, honest and transparent.

Over time, the local authority has not had a strong enough impact on improving the quality of leadership and teaching, particularly in secondary schools. As a result, too many schools have been placed into Estyn follow-up or a statutory category or have caused the local authority concern for an extended period of time.

Recently introduced professional discussions with schools have supported the local authority to develop a clearer understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in its schools. Support for schools is increasingly tailored to their specific needs. This work has been supported by the introduction of peer headteachers as School Improvement Partners who work alongside school leaders to plan and identify support requirements. This work is at an early stage and it is too early to measure the impact of these approaches on improving the quality of leadership and teaching in schools in Torfaen.

The local authority has strengthened its relationship with the Education Achievement Service (EAS) and is beginning to offer increasing challenge on aspects of their work.

Officers, working with their regional counterparts, have worked suitably to streamline the methods for reporting school improvement activity, and this has helped them to develop a clearer understanding of the support being provided to their schools.

Where schools have caused concern for an extended period of time, officers have worked with the EAS to provide additional support and intervention. In addition, the local authority has used warning notices and its statutory powers, such as putting in place an Interim Executive Board in response to concerns about leadership and governance in one of its schools. Supporting headteachers from other schools have been engaged for fixed periods in secondary schools in statutory categories with the aim of accelerating progress. However, these actions have not consistently led to sufficient or sustained improvements in the quality of leadership or teaching.

Termly updates and partnership board meetings, which include wider education services, provide appropriate opportunities for the local authority and the EAS to discuss support activity that has taken place in individual schools. To support their schools in a statutory category, officers have engaged positively with the Welsh Government's pilot 'multi-agency' approach. In addition, the recently established Team Around the School panels for schools causing concern, which include officers, regional staff, and school leaders, enable the local authority to explore the support provided as well as barriers to progress. Overall, local authority officers do not consistently challenge the information provided through this activity well enough in order to ensure that all schools are supported to improve provision and leadership. This has contributed to the lack of tangible progress in two of the three schools causing concern. Moreover, local authority officers do not hold the EAS to account well enough for their work and the partnership has not ensured sufficiently rapid improvement for the schools most in need of support.

Schools in Torfaen access a suitable range of professional learning and support provided by the EAS. Where required, School Improvement Partners broker additional tailored support from Learning Network Schools or subject specific curriculum partners. In the best cases, support is planned carefully and tailored to individual needs, and has clear criteria of the intended outcomes. In these cases, School Improvement Partners ensure that progress against priorities is monitored closely to secure improvements. However, support plans are not always clear enough about the intended impact. In addition, evaluations are too variable and do not focus closely enough on the impact that support has on improving the quality of teaching or leadership. Generally, the evaluation of professional learning has focused too closely on levels of engagement and not the impact on improving practice.

Overall, school governors receive a suitable range of support and professional learning. This includes helping them to understand national educational reforms and supporting with the appointment of headteachers.

How well does the youth service support the needs of young people?

Torfaen youth service works with young people between the ages of 11 and 25 offering both open access and more targeted provision. Local authority officers consult regularly with young people to ensure that provision meets their needs well. Youth workers are flexible in their approach and adapt provision successfully. As a result, they have supported many young people on their journey to adulthood.

During the periods of lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, youth workers maintained strong relationships with young people. They led the work in school hubs and continued with outreach work. As youth services have returned to more usual ways of working, high numbers of young people have returned to open access provision. These young people enjoy taking part in activities that improve their confidence and develop their social skills.

Youth workers use effective and responsive partnerships with other agencies and council services to support the needs of a wide range of specialist groups and address government priorities. They provide targeted support for groups of young people including young carers, young women with additional learning needs, vulnerable young men, and LGBTQ+ young people. Youth workers offer effective and caring support for these groups in safe, comfortable environments, helping to equip these young people with skills for living successfully in society.

Youth workers record young people's progress and achievement well. Local authority officers have developed an in-house electronic system for recording provision, young people's achievements and the support that they require. Youth workers use this data effectively to develop provision, target support for young people and share information securely across agencies when young people are involved with more than one service.

Youth work staff are full-time, well qualified and experienced. Youth workers can access an effective and flexible traineeship route to qualifications in youth work that includes work experience opportunities. There are instances where young people who have used the youth service have become degree qualified youth workers who work within the service.

The service has pioneered an innovative and highly successful secondment of an educational psychologist. The support from this psychologist helps youth workers to develop effective strategies and learning materials to support a wide range of young people.

The youth service recruits local young Welsh speakers as youth workers. They provide valuable support to young people and normalise the use of the language in appealing activities. A notable example of this is the 'build and design a motorised go cart' project that is delivered in both Welsh and English. However, ensuring the availability of a consistent Welsh language offer and Welsh resources remains an area for development.

The youth service is managed in a supportive, caring manner. Youth workers are empowered to take the lead in developing and improving the service. They place the provision for young people and the places they meet at the heart of their communities. Service planning aligns well with the key corporate aims of raising educational attainment and supporting the most vulnerable. Managers adapt and develop partnership arrangements skilfully to achieve this aim.

The service uses its funding sources well to maximise support for young people. Funding arrangements are agile and change to meet developing needs. Close arrangements with European funded projects including employability support, and work with other agencies, enable effective and adaptable working.

The premises used for youth work are suitable and located in convenient community locations. The service uses effective partnership working to share the use of buildings owned by other agencies. However, many buildings need refreshing in order to enrich young people's experiences.

How effective is the provision for pupils with special educational needs/ additional learning needs?

In line with most local authorities in Wales, provision for many pupils with special educational needs / additional learning needs (SEN/ALN) takes place in mainstream schools. The local authority also makes provision through seven special needs resource bases (SNRB) attached to mainstream schools, one pupil referral unit and one special school. The local authority also makes appropriate use of outofcounty provision for children and young people whose needs cannot be met within the authority.

In addition, the local authority provides a range of generally well-regarded specialist support services, either directly, or through commissioned arrangements. These offer services across the range of provision in the authority including early years settings.

Just over a fifth of pupils have SEN, slightly lower than in previous years. Despite this reduction, there has been an increase in the number of pupils with autism, speech communication and language difficulties and those with emotional and behavioural needs.

Overall, there are strengths in how the local authority supports its schools and other settings to provide for pupils with ALN. These include providing helpful advice and guidance on preparing for ALN reform and well-understood arrangements for referrals. However, the local authority does not have a systematic approach to analysing key data relevant to its ALN own services provision or the specialist provision in schools. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to understand the quality or impact of provision and impedes the ability of the authority to identify strengths and priorities for improvement.

Despite a reduction in the number of longer-term fixed term exclusions for pupils with SEN, permanent and short-term exclusions for pupils with SEN have been variable but more recently have been increasing. Pupils with SEN are three times more likely to be excluded than pupils without an SEN, in line with national figures. Overall, when compared to other authorities in the region, pupils with SEN are generally less likely to be excluded from schools in Torfaen.

Schools and settings have a good understanding of how to access local authority specialist officers, and arrangements for referrals to SEN panels are clearly understood. Schools welcome the advice and guidance that officers provide. The local authority enhances school-based provision effectively for pupils that may not meet thresholds for specialist placement. However, there are no clear entry or exit criteria for specialist provision. Arrangements for completing the statementing process are effective. As a result, nearly all statements are issued within statutory time scales. In addition, appeals to tribunal are historically very low.

The local authority has recently provided all schools with a helpful ALN toolkit. This highlights the ALN reform timeline with key activities for schools to complete by given dates. Schools also receive supporting documents including exemplar policies and information leaflets for parents. However, the toolkit does not contain important information relating to thresholds or criteria for individual development plans that will be maintained by the local authority as opposed to schools. The Welsh version of this toolkit was not made available to schools at the same time.

In addition, the local authority has very recently provided schools with the useful regionally developed “principles and practices” document. This captures the local authority’s expectations in developing inclusive school practices. The local authority maintains that this document is its strategy for ALN. However, the document is targeted at schools and does not include the breadth of services or provision that the local authority is responsible for.

The local authority and schools have a strong history of working collaboratively with other authorities in the region. This, together with local approach to develop ALN reform leads, and cluster working, has supported schools well in their preparations and implementation of ALN reform. An example of this has been the regional development of the ‘barrier to learning matrix’. Upon completion of an online questionnaire, a report is instantly generated that provides very useful strategies and resources to support pupils. The report also indicates where more specific and specialised interventions may be necessary. Increasingly, the local authority is seeking evidence from schools on their use of strategies before decisions are made for more specialist support.

The use of modified days or reduced timetables has increased considerably over the past four years. The local authority has, very recently, drafted a policy for consultation and has started to capture basic information on the use of reduced timetables. However, it does not have sufficient oversight of the use of modified days including, for example, how many school hours are not being attended by pupils or for how long. The use of modified days is a frequent concern of parents when seeking advice and support from the parent partnership service. Similarly, the local authority does not have a clear enough understanding of the use of alternative curriculum provision that is being used by schools. These are issues that the recently formed ALN development group are pursuing.

The local authority has very recently started to have structured conversations with mainstream schools that host SNRBs. From the limited evidence available, these demonstrate that the local authority does not have a secure enough understanding of these provisions, for example how the SNRBs are staffed, outcomes for pupils including attendance and exclusion information and whether the needs of pupils accepted into the provisions have changed over time.

The number of pupils, including those looked after by the local authority, that are placed in out-of-county schools has increased over time. All these pupils have ALN relating to autistic spectrum conditions or emotional and behavioural difficulties. The local authority generally monitors the progress of pupils annually but does not systematically record and report on pupil destinations or their progress against expectations..

Overall, services for pupils with SEN through the medium of Welsh are too variable and in some key areas are not available. As part of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), the local authority plans to open a SNRB at a local Welsh-medium secondary school. Colleagues across the region have been developing Welsh medium resources. However, the local authority is not sufficiently aware of how these could benefit pupils in Torfaen's schools.

The delegation of SEN monies to schools is well understood. An ALN funding panel oversees requests from schools for funding that is in addition to the core SEN budget. The panel considers requests and challenges whether schools are making suitable provision for pupils. Where appropriate, additional support and financial resources are allocated.

What has been the impact of school re-organisation including provision for post-16 pupils and pupils attending Welsh-medium schools?

The local authority has successfully delivered a series of school reorganisation projects as part of the first band of the 21st century schools programme. Officers recognise school reorganisation priorities appropriately, for example by analysing pupil admissions data and reports on the condition of school buildings. School reorganisation plans link appropriately with the authority's higher-level priorities, such as those identified in the Local Development Plan and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. Local authority officers have been well supported by elected members to rationalise the number of schools in the authority. As a result, the proportion of surplus places in schools has reduced, and the capacity of schools now aligns with the authority's vision for providing optimum value for money. In addition, a greater number of pupils have access to safe walking routes to school, and there are more community facilities available in local authority schools.

By investing in new schools and renovation projects, the overall standard of school buildings in the authority has improved. The local authority also prioritises the maintenance of existing school buildings appropriately. Education officers work closely with colleagues from the local authority's 'neighbourhood' service area in order to address deficiencies in the school building stock appropriately, placing a suitable emphasis on health, safety and continuity of business.

The authority has rationalised provision for post-16 education appropriately as part of Band A of the 21st century schools programme by working in partnership with Coleg Gwent to establish the Torfaen Learning Zone. Through the Torfaen Learning Zone, the authority has ensured that young people have access to a more extensive range of academic and vocational courses. The new provision offers young people access to a range of high-quality facilities to support their studies, for example graphic design technology, science laboratories, and a theatre. The Torfaen Learning Zone partnership agreement outlines suitable principles for joint-working along with valuable accountability measures. However, the agreement is still in draft form and not all the evaluation activities outlined within it are fully operational at present.

Learners wishing to access post-16 provision through the medium of Welsh do not have access to the same range of courses as those studying through the medium of English. The authority is beginning to explore ways to broaden the range of post-16 options available through the medium of Welsh, for example by liaising with

neighbouring authorities to consider remote learning options, although this work is at a very early stage. Where appropriate, the authority works with regional partners to develop a strategic approach to school reorganisation, for example by agreeing on an approach to manage out-of-authority demand for Welshmedium secondary education.

In recent years the authority has placed an increased focus on developing its Welshmedium provision. There is sufficient capacity in Welshmedium schools to meet the immediate demand and future growth. This is as a result of investment during Band A of the 21st century schools programme, as well as plans that form part of Band B of the programme. For example, plans to extend provision at the authority's Welshmedium secondary school to cater for pupils from the age of three will increase Welshmedium places in the central part of the authority. The authority has made suitable plans to support the gradual population of the new primary phase, for example by allocating funding to provide the school with a suitably experienced senior leader. Plans to establish dedicated late immersion provision to support pupils to access Welshmedium education at different entry points are at an early stage of development. The authority ensures that there is adequate early years provision as identified in its childcare sufficiency assessment and ensures that such provision takes into account school organisation developments, for example by ensuring that Welshmedium pre-school provision is available to feed into Welsh-medium schools. Very recently, in conjunction with members of the Welsh Education Forum, the authority has developed a useful information booklet for parents to promote the benefits of bilingualism and Welsh-medium education.

Leadership and management

Raising educational outcomes for all children and young people has been one of Torfaen's three key corporate priorities for the past five years. This ambition is supported by the leader and deputy leader of the council who both have a clear understanding of the importance of giving the young people of Torfaen the best possible start in life.

Due to the challenges of the pandemic, leaders have refreshed appropriately the council's interim corporate plan. The priority for education now reflects better their ambition to support children and young people's well-being as well as to raise educational attainment. Over the past five years, council funding to schools has increased substantially, reflecting the elected members' commitment to fulfilling their vision. In addition, elected members have made bold decisions to support their vision, such as establishing the Torfaen Learning Zone for 16 to 19-year-olds across the county borough. However, overall, actions to bring about improvements within the education services in Torfaen have been too slow. The local authority has not secured the improvements needed to ensure that all children and young people, particularly in the secondary sector, have access to high quality provision.

The recently appointed chief executive communicates well his ambition for all services in Torfaen and articulates clearly how he expects senior officers to take actions to accomplish this mission. He recognises the need to improve governance and accountability across the local authority, including within education services. He has begun to put in place more robust performance management systems to hold

departments and individuals to account for the quality of their work, but these are at an early stage of development and have not yet resulted in improved outcomes.

Members of the education scrutiny committee discuss appropriately cabinet members' reports, prepared by senior officers. In the best examples, such as when considering the service's most recent self-evaluation report, they ask pertinent questions and request additional evidence to help them to understand the issues. However, they do not always receive the information that they need to carry out their function effectively. This hampers their ability to challenge the cabinet over improving the quality of education provision.

The Chief Education Officer has a broad overview of the activity taking place in the education service. He keeps up-to-date with officers through regular dialogue and termly performance review meetings with service leads. These interactions, although useful for reflecting on performance, are not sufficiently rigorous and do not hold officers suitably to account for service level outcomes. In general, teams within the education service do not provide sufficiently robust reports of their work. As a result, senior officers are unable to accurately evaluate the impact of the work across the education service.

In recent years, officers have improved relationships with schools notably. They provided schools with timely and helpful operational support during the pandemic, which has been valued by school leaders. The senior officer and the cabinet member engage well with a range of partners, including the headteacher strategy group. Officers also consult with headteachers when developing strategic plans, such as when agreeing the local authority's priorities within the regional consortium business plan, and to inform their self-evaluation. Partners have worked closely together to draw up a refreshed vision for the education service, known as their 'Shared Ambitions'. However, overall, arrangements to gather feedback from children and young people are not well developed.

Officers work closely with the regional consortium. They discuss individual schools on a regular basis and agree on the required support to meet each school's needs. However, over time the pace of improvement in secondary schools in an Estyn follow-up category has been slow. As a result, performance in too many secondary schools has continued to cause concern, and this is a significant shortcoming. The local authority has strengthened the leadership capacity in these schools over recent times, with the interim appointment of successful leaders from schools in neighbouring authorities. These arrangements have not in all cases resulted in the necessary improvements. In addition, the local authority's plans to develop effective leadership capacity across its schools to ensure successful succession planning are underdeveloped.

Evaluation of the service's work lacks sufficient rigour at service level and across many teams. It is not adequately focused on impact and is too often presented as an account of actions that have taken place. Where data and evidence are available, officers do not analyse or evaluate it well enough to help inform their strategy for improvement. As a result, the link between self-evaluation and planning for improvement is not sufficiently strong. The local authority's processes for self-evaluation, monitoring and quality assurance of its work are currently underdeveloped and inconsistent.

The quality of improvement planning across the service is inconsistent. In the best examples, plans include targets or milestones against which to monitor progress. However, many plans lack suitable performance measures to enable leaders to track progress over time or to evaluate the impact of any work carried out. Often objectives do not have sufficient clarity or focus, and success criteria cannot be measured meaning it is difficult to judge progress accurately. The range of plans across the service is not sufficiently aligned, which hinders officers' ability to drive improvement in many important areas, and it is hard for officers to evaluate their impact on improving outcomes. The local authority has not made sustained improvements against many recommendations from the last inspection.

Officers and members have access to a wide range of opportunities to undertake regular and meaningful professional learning. For example, officers have access to relevant events and material offered by the regional consortium. In addition, the Educational Psychology team provides valuable support and coaching for members of the Youth Service.

There is an appropriate culture of corporate safeguarding within the local authority. All employees and elected members undertake safeguarding training and each service area has a designated safeguarding lead officer. Education safeguarding officers provide schools with a high level of support including advice on safeguarding matters, regular safeguarding updates and sharing useful links to training opportunities. In addition, all schools submit an annual detailed safeguarding self-evaluation. Officers analyse each one and provide schools with bespoke feedback on aspects that they need to address. However, they do not ask schools to submit information on instances of physical intervention or analyse data they collect from schools on incidents of bullying.

Elected members do not have a strong enough overview of safeguarding in education. The Cabinet does not challenge officers over their annual safeguarding report well enough.

The local authority's prioritisation of education reflects the increased proportion of funding it allocates to education services, which has been above the Welsh average for a number of years. The local authority delegated a lower percentage of its education budget to schools for 2021-2022 than for all but one other local authority in Wales, but allocates a higher proportion of its revenue budget to education services as a whole than for the majority of other local authorities in Wales. It has also prioritised capital funding to deliver its 21st Century Schools programme.

The education budget was underspent overall in 2020-2021 and is forecast to underspend again in 2021-2022. The local authority does not make use of comparative data to compare the costs of its education services with other authorities.

Largely due to additional grant funding received during the pandemic, overall school balances have increased from £1.8 million at the end of March 2020 to a forecast position of around £8 million at the end of March 2022. The local authority does not plan to claw back those balances, but intends to work with schools to use those balances appropriately in the medium term. The local authority's financial management process for schools with deficit balances, that requires the production

of a recovery plan alongside a request for a licensed deficit, has been applied. The local authority has service level agreements with schools for the delivery of a range of support services, with generally high take-up from schools.

The Schools Budget Forum, which consists of both school headteachers and officers, meets regularly to consider key financial matters affecting schools. The Forum has identified the need to undertake a review of the schools financing model, which has not been comprehensively reviewed since 2013. The funding formula for pupils with ALN was reviewed more recently, in 2018.

The local authority understands the financial pressures for education services and schools and in recent years has allocated additional funding in response, including for ALN and pay for school staff. Headteachers generally view the authority's financial management support for schools positively. The schools finance team also work closely with schools to manage their budgets and during the pandemic these working relationships have strengthened.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consult the local authority on the local inspection questions to be used during the inspection, based on the authority's self-evaluation, strategic plans and relevant data held by Estyn
- analyse the outcomes from open questionnaires, including the views of learners, parents, school staff and governors, local authority staff, regional consortium staff, elected members and general public
- carry out a preliminary visit to the local authority to meet with a range of relevant partners to education services, such as learner representatives, headteachers and governors, and leaders from statutory and third sector agencies working with children and young people

During the inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet with the leader of the council, elected members responsible for education services, elected members responsible for the scrutiny of education services, the chief executive, the director of education, other leaders and managers in education services, other relevant staff in the local authority, the managing director of the regional consortium for school improvement and other relevant staff from the regional consortium
- look closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- consider the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinise a variety of documents, including information on learner outcomes, information on the performance of schools and other education settings, including information from the regional consortium for school improvement, minutes from a range of meetings, reports presented to council or scrutiny, information relating to the safeguarding of learners and any other information relevant to the local authority's education services held by Estyn

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provide a draft copy of the report for the local authority to note any concerns with factual accuracy, and made amendments where necessary

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 38 of the Education Act 1997, the Children Act 2004 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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