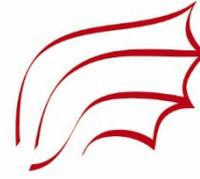




Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

A report on education services in

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

**The General Offices
Steelworks Road
Ebbw Vale
Blaenau Gwent
NP23 6DN**

Date of inspection: November 2022

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh.

About Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Blaenau Gwent has a total population of around 67,000 people, and a school population of around 9,400 pupils. There are 25 schools in the local authority, including one that provides Welsh-medium education.

The local authority works in partnership with four other local authorities in South East Wales for some of its education services, including a regional school improvement services (the EAS), a regional ethnic minority support service (GEMS) and a regional support service for learners with sensory and communication needs (SENCOM).

The Council Leader and Executive Member People & Education were both elected to their roles in May 2022. The interim Chief Executive took up post in April 2022, and the Corporate Director for Education took up post in November 2020.

In 2022-2023, the local authority's education budget is around £66,637,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2022-2023 is £5,697, slightly higher than the Wales average of £5,032.

The local authority's last inspection was in January 2013. 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 Blaenau Gwent is noted below:

- Over a three-year average, 30.1% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, higher than the Wales average of 23%
- 6.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 13.3%
- 1.8% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language
- 1.1% of pupils aged 5 or over are fluent in Welsh, lower than the Wales average of 15.6%
- 17.3% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs

Summary

The local authority has made good progress with its education services since it was last inspected around ten years ago as important areas for improvement have largely been addressed. One of the local authority's four priorities in its current corporate plan for 2022-2027 is to 'maximise learning and skills for all learners to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent'. Senior officers and elected members have a strong commitment to education and this is reflected in the funding given to schools and education services.

The local authority generally plans well to make sure that it has suitable education provision to meet the needs of every child and young person. Over the past decade, the local authority has successfully reduced surplus places in schools and improved the conditions of its school buildings. The local authority is suitably developing its Welsh-medium education provision. Whilst there have been some positive developments in provision for pupils with additional learning needs, the quality of planning for future provision is variable.

There are many strengths in the local authority's work to reduce the impact of deprivation on education outcomes and its support for families in low-income households. There are also many strengths in the services to support children and young people's well-being and promote positive relationships.

The authority has worked with its regional school improvement service to strengthen the challenge and support it provides to schools. This work has greater impact for children in non-maintained and primary age settings than for young people in secondary age settings. Provision for young people was too slow to improve in two schools placed in statutory categories.

Despite strengths in education services, corporate leaders have not ensured that their vision and strategic aims for education are fully understood by other officers, elected members, school staff and external partners. Also, corporate leaders have not ensured that the corporate plan is supported by coherent delivery plans for education that include related actions and measurable success criteria. Overall, the quality of self-evaluation, planning for improvement, and performance management is not strong enough.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve the corporate leadership of education services
- R2 Improve the quality of self-evaluation, strategic planning and performance management
- R3 Accelerate improvements in provision for secondary age pupils in schools causing concern

What happens next

Following the publication of the inspection report, the local authority should update its plans to address the recommendations and to take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority should update its plans within three months of the publication of the inspection 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 between March 2020 and February 2022. 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 eight primary schools, one all-age school and one secondary school. Overall, inspection outcomes during this period were in line with the national average. We judged that standards were good in all but one of the primary schools. However, standards in the all-age school and the secondary school were judged to be adequate and unsatisfactory respectively, and both schools were placed in a statutory follow-up category. Although one of these schools has been removed from its category, both of these schools were slow to improve standards following their inspection. Since inspections resumed in February 2022, we have inspected two primary schools and a special school. We asked both primary schools to provide case studies of good practice, but the special school requires special measures.

In the three years before the start of the pandemic, the proportion of pupils who achieved five or more GCSEs at grade C or above including English or Welsh and mathematics varied considerably across the authority's schools. One school performed consistently well, one school performed consistently satisfactorily, one school had a worsening trend and one school performed consistently poorly.

In the school inspections between September 2017 and March 2020, pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning were judged to be good in many schools. For the three years from 2017 to 2019, overall school attendance was consistently lower than the national average. However, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was higher than that of their peers nationally and rates of persistent absenteeism and unauthorised absence were broadly in line with national averages, which are positive given the socio-economic context of the authority. The rate of fixed-term school exclusions of five days or less was well above the national average, although the rate of fixed-term exclusions of more than five days was broadly in line with the national average.

After Year 11, almost all young people progress to further education, employment or training. This is a particular strength given the historically high levels of young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and given the challenging socio-economic context of the authority. Young people continue to benefit from support from dedicated officers beyond their initial destination after Year 11 that helps them to move to an alternative education, employment or training destination if their initial destination does not work out.

Children and young people currently benefit from a wide range of services to support their well-being. Children and young people aged 10 to 25 are well supported by the authority's counselling service in schools and communities which, on average, leads to considerable reductions in emotional distress. Young carers have identity cards that help to reduce barriers that can prevent them from participating fully in and benefiting from activities that their peers enjoy. Vulnerable children and young people benefit from free after school and holiday activities that develop their literacy and numeracy skills and support their personal and social development, physical health and well-being.

When given the opportunity, children and young people in the authority influence decisions that affect them. A young person is elected from the Youth Forum to be a member of the scrutiny committee that considers education matters. The voice of secondary age pupils has supported the development of helpful LGBTQ+ support groups in all their schools.

Education services

How well does the local authority challenge and support non-maintained settings and schools to improve?

Officers in Blaenau Gwent generally know their schools well and have developed a good understanding of the contexts of different schools. Following a review of the education service structure, the local authority created a dedicated senior leadership role for school improvement and inclusion. This has increased the capacity of the local authority to work more closely with schools and to link more effectively with the regional school improvement service, the Educational Achievement Service (EAS).

Officers have strengthened and improved their relationships with senior leaders in most schools. Most headteachers feel that officers listen to their views and take account of their opinions. For example, headteachers identified that pupils' reading skills are weaker following the pandemic and the local authority has commissioned the EAS to support schools to improve these skills.

The local authority and the EAS work well together to support schools. School improvement partners have a well-structured plan of work with school leaders across the academic year, starting with sessions that focus on school self-evaluation and professional discussions with key staff from the school, the local authority and the EAS. These sessions help to identify the level and nature of the support that schools will benefit from to enable them to address their improvement priorities successfully. A single plan for each school outlines the support that the school will receive, details of grant spending, school improvement priorities and termly evaluations of the progress against these. Officers implement a tiered approach to providing support to schools. When schools need additional support, officers implement the Team around the School approach to ensure a holistic approach that meets the bespoke needs of the school.

There are currently no primary schools or non-maintained settings requiring follow-up activity after inspection. Over the past two years officers have identified a few primary schools that require improvement. The local authority and the EAS have provided good support for these schools to help them to improve. This support includes

strengthening the governing body and commissioning curriculum support through the 'local network of schools' process. Where the local authority uses its statutory powers to appoint governors, it takes care to match governors' skills and expertise closely to the needs of the school.

The local authority early years team and the advisory teacher from the EAS provide the three non-maintained settings with effective advice and guidance. This includes support for evaluation and improvement planning as well as guidance on how to create a stimulating environment for young children. This support is helping the settings to deliver good quality provision for their children.

Two schools in the local authority require special measures currently, one secondary school and one special school, and one all-age school was removed from the category of needing significant improvement in February 2022. In two of these three schools, officers did not recognise important shortcomings or the need for school leaders to make significant improvements prior to these being identified by inspectors. The pace of improvement in these two schools has been too slow. Reviews of progress in these schools show that issues identified at the time of the inspections, particularly around the quality of teaching, are not being addressed quickly enough and impact on learners' progress for too long a period of time. Officers do not monitor progress closely enough or ensure that school improvement partners set sufficiently precise and focused success criteria against which progress can be measured. In a few instances where improvement partners lacked the relevant specialist knowledge and skills to be able to support and challenge schools, the local authority challenged the EAS and ensured that suitable improvement partners were put in place.

The EAS and the local authority provide a range of appropriate professional learning opportunities for staff at all levels in schools. These include national leadership programmes and training to support teaching and learning. In addition, the local authority delivers its own useful complementary programmes for aspiring and new headteachers, which helps to mitigate the challenge of recruiting experienced senior leaders to schools in the county. Recent changes to the programme to support governors means that they now access training matched better to their needs.

How well does the local authority tackle inequalities in education experiences and outcomes for children living in poverty?

The local authority has a clear commitment to reducing the impact of poverty on education outcomes. Officers know their communities well and use information they gather locally, national surveys and reports to identify needs and prioritise resources. Heads of service across the local authority have established an anti-poverty council and elected members have recently set up a cost-of-living crisis group. Elected members are committed to addressing this issue, and a new member 'poverty champion' brings knowledge and expertise to help support this aspect of their work. Members look beyond their authority to see what they can learn from others to help improve Blaenau Gwent for its citizens.

Officers collaborate well across directorates on issues relating to poverty to enable resources to be targeted towards those most in need. This is helping vulnerable families to access services where they can get suitable advice, support and practical

help. Officers work well with local charitable groups to provide support for families who are struggling financially, as well as ensuring that period poverty does not lead to educational disadvantage.

The local authority uses a wide range of approaches to help mitigate the effects of poverty in pre-school and children's early years in education. This begins before birth with support for mothers-to-be by, for example, encouraging healthy eating and developing budgeting skills. There are groups for new mothers to help with parenting, for example the 'Lap not App' programme that promotes the development of bonds and relationships. Flying Start hubs are largely within local communities to make them as accessible as possible. Within these hubs, there is holistic support for parents, including opportunities for education and training to access employment.

Officers ensure that schools spend their pupil development grants appropriately, supporting them to make well-considered decisions and challenging them on the impact of their spending. Headteachers value the support the authority provided during the pandemic. School holiday enrichment programmes provide structured childcare for children to have access to sport, craft and environmental activities. Children taking part in these programmes have a daily meal provided for them, learn to cook simple, healthy recipes and have opportunities to prepare meals for their families to dine together.

From September 2022, the local authority increased catering capacity to provide universal free school meals for all pupils up to Year 2, going beyond the Welsh Government's minimum requirements for the roll-out of free school meals at this stage. The authority works with a specialist dietician to ensure that meals are healthy and nutritious, and that they cater appropriately for an increasing number of pupils with special dietary requirements. Additionally, healthy schools co-ordinators work with schools and settings to promote healthy lifestyles, for example by promoting healthy snacks in the early years.

The authority identifies vulnerable children and young people of all ages using a range of suitable risk measures. The needs of the more vulnerable are considered by multi-agency panels. Professionals track, monitor and support vulnerable children and young people through a named support worker. These children and young people have support during important milestones, such as transition from primary to secondary schools and on to post-16 education, training or employment.

Families First funds four social workers to work with schools across clusters. This enables schools to access appropriate support quickly for pupils and families to reduce the risk of disengagement from school and learning. Recently, the authority has restarted its family engagement work following the pandemic, for example supporting pupils returning to school and those with examination anxiety.

The authority acknowledges the work of young carers in the authority and the challenges they can face. Local authority and health professionals proactively identify young carers so that can offer them suitable support. Over the past three years, young carers have been provided with a National Young Carers ID card, which gives access to a range of helpful benefits and incentives to help them and their families, such as free access to leisure facilities and permission to collect prescriptions for

those they care for. Elected members recognise and celebrate the contribution of young carers at an annual awards ceremony.

How well does the local authority support schools to promote respectful relationships and address negative behaviour effectively?

Through the education psychology service and an 'inclusive practice service', all schools have access to a range of suitable support to promote positive, respectful relationships and address negative behaviour effectively. These two services work closely together.

Officers in the education psychology service provide helpful training for school staff, including Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) training for teaching assistants. They provide valuable guidance for additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCos) that helps them to consider how to best meet pupils' additional learning needs.

The local authority commissions one of its special schools to provide the 'inclusive practice service' for other schools. This service provides beneficial support for staff to understand behaviours in schools and respond appropriately. It has recently modified its approach from directly supporting individual pupils to providing professional learning to school staff so that they can support pupils themselves.

The local authority has recently developed new 'positive relationships and behaviour' guidance and a 'relationships (anti-bullying)' policy, although there was limited involvement of schools and learners in developing these. The anti-bullying policy sets out the expectation that schools will record all alleged incidents of bullying, outlining the specific types of bullying, including bullying involving pupils with protected characteristics. Previously the local authority had not been collecting information about incidents from schools in a way that would enable it to identify potential issues and act upon them. The local authority has improved its work in this area by purchasing a safeguarding information management system for every school that is being used to record and report incidents and related pupil demographics at school level and collate this information centrally. It is too early to evaluate how well the local authority and its schools are using this system.

The local authority has developed an effective early identification tool, which identifies children and young people aged 7 to 25 years who may be at risk of exclusion or disengaging with education, employment or training, or becoming homeless. Through Families First and a multi-agency approach, the local authority provides helpful early support for these children and young people. Blaenau Gwent's youth service provides strong support for young people aged 11-25 who are at risk of being excluded or being not in education, employment or training (NEET). Working closely with other support services, youth workers support young people on a one-to-one basis and in groups, both in schools and in their communities. This co-ordinated approach has helped young people to remain engaged in their education and has supported a reduction in school exclusions. The proportion of young people who are NEET has reduced considerably over the last decade and young people are supported positively beyond their initial destination after Year 11.

The youth service co-ordinates a counselling service for children and young people from age 10 to age 25 that is provided in schools and community locations. This service provides helpful support for children's and young people's emotional well-being and mental health. A community psychologist provides young people with more specialist support, if necessary, where they are unable to access this through traditional routes. More recently, the local authority has established play therapy for children in Year 2 to Year 6. These services help children and young people to better understand behaviours and manage their relationships with others as well as reducing their emotional distress.

A dedicated detached youth team is used effectively to address anti-social behaviour in local communities. For example, following concerns about the behaviour of some young people in a car park outside of school hours, detached youth workers used their skills to divert young people to more suitable activities. Incidents of anti-social behaviour have reduced wherever this team has worked, and this work supports the work of schools in promoting good relationships.

The authority has very recently established a vulnerable learners panel, which involves senior leaders from secondary and all-age schools. It was established in collaboration with schools to improve the well-being of vulnerable pupils and help decrease exclusions. Early signs suggest that this panel is adding value to the existing range of services.

The range of useful support services to promote positive relationships in schools and communities means that exclusions are low in many schools, although a few schools still have high exclusion rates.

How well does the local authority ensure that the interests of learners are above all others in its planning for schools and other education provision?

Over the past ten years, or so, the local authority has been successful in both reducing surplus places in schools and improving the conditions of its school estate. The local authority has been prepared to make difficult decisions in relation to closing schools and replacing them with mergers and new builds. Where appropriate the local authority has modernised school buildings, for example through refurbishments and extensions.

The local authority has kept its school organisation policy under review and recently amended it to reflect recent developments, including the impact of the pandemic. The policy appropriately considers and incorporates national and local priorities such as its Welsh in Education strategic plan and information and communication technology (ICT) in schools. However, the engagement of headteachers in this strategy was variable and the strategy is generally not well understood. In addition, despite many appropriate actions to improve connectivity and developments in relation to ICT, there is no clear ICT strategy.

The south-east Wales regional sustainable communities for learning group was established by the local authority around five years ago and has recently been extended and includes local authorities from outside the region. The group's work currently focuses on sharing information on processes regarding the planning of

school places, standardising costs, and issues regarding sustainability and carbon neutral designs.

The key focus of the local authority's Welsh in education strategic plan (WESP) is to ensure that Welsh-medium provision is available and accessible in all three of the county's valleys. This is a sensible and pragmatic approach and is supported well by plans to increase access to pre-school and nursery Welsh-medium provision. The Welsh in education forum (WEF) comprises a broad range of partners and provides an effective steer for this work. Officers are aware of the risks in not being able to deliver the WESP's priorities and are considering appropriate steps to mitigate against these risks. The WESP's focus on improving Welsh skills of pupils in English-medium schools and expanding Welsh-medium provision in post-16 is underdeveloped. The local authority is considering working with Merthyr Tydfil and Powys local authorities to scope out the possibility of establishing a Welsh-medium secondary school to cater for the expected rise in demand during the next 10 years.

The local authority has a well-established Welsh-medium primary school in Blaina. An immersion provision is being developed at the school, which will provide additional opportunities for pupils to access Welsh-medium education. There are well-developed plans to open a seedling Welsh-medium primary school in Tredegar in September 2023. This school will also offer childcare provision and a resource base for pupils with autism.

Despite recent closer working between colleagues in education regarding the planning of provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN), data is not always used effectively enough to inform long-term planning. This is illustrated by the recent decision to increase capacity at a special school by nearly 40%. The needs of children with complex special education and medical needs, including those with profound and multiple learning difficulties, are generally known from a very young age, so the demand for additional capacity should have been foreseen and planned for in a more timely way.

The local authority has established useful resource bases in several mainstream schools for pupils with additional learning needs. In some cases, these resource bases helped to address surplus places in the mainstream schools, but as the number of pupils in mainstream classes in these schools has increased, a few schools are now struggling for space. In 2017, the local authority undertook a very useful review of resource base provisions. This identified strengths and areas for improvement across the provisions. However, the ongoing monitoring of these provisions is inconsistent. There are very few references to these provisions in notes of visit from school improvement partners. Where they are referenced, comments made are too limited to be of any value to the local authority and rarely evaluate the impact of provision on pupils' progress.

Senior leaders have a suitable vision for inclusion and pupils with ALN. However, this is not yet supported by a clear strategy. A range of very useful policy and guidance materials have recently been shared with schools.

The local authority makes provision for pupils in out-of-county settings. Half of the pupils currently placed in out-of-county provision have additional learning needs related to their social, emotional and behavioural needs. The local authority does not

analyse its use of out-of-county settings well enough in order to understand the implications for its capacity to meet the needs of pupils locally.

Leadership and management

Leaders in Blaenau Gwent place a high priority on improving outcomes for children and young people across the local authority. The local authority has high aspirations for regeneration and education to enable all children and young people in the local area to thrive and succeed. Lead elected members and senior officers are committed to improving conditions for their community so that deprivation is not a barrier to long term success. Elected members and officers demonstrate a strong commitment to 'maximise learning and skills for all learners to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent', one of the four priorities set out in the corporate plan 2022-2027. Corporate leaders and the education directorate are beginning to refine their approaches to ensure that this commitment is translated into specific and measurable actions.

Senior leaders in the education directorate have worked with elected members and other senior officers across the council to establish a suitable vision for education. This aims to create a 'school-led, self-improving system that develops 'better schools, better citizens and better communities'. However, this vision is not communicated clearly or consistently enough by the corporate leadership team. As a result, the strategic direction for education is not sufficiently understood by all elected members, officers, or staff in schools.

Corporate leaders have not ensured that the corporate priority and directorate vision for education are coherently reflected in education plans. The corporate plan sets out how the local authority will know how well it is doing in relation to its priority for education, but the range of broad indicators in the corporate plan are not developed sufficiently into specific success criteria against relevant actions in education plans. This disconnect between corporate and education plans tempers senior leaders' ability to hold officers to account for their work and ensure an appropriate pace of improvement in identified areas. Nevertheless, the executive board, which includes senior elected members and senior officers from across the local authority, is used appropriately to hold education officers to account for progress against planned actions. In the board meetings, members challenge officers suitably.

Despite the weakness in corporate leadership, the education senior management team has developed strong working relationships with officers across the directorate and places a high level of trust in staff at all levels to deliver high quality services. Senior education managers have good oversight of most education services covered by our local inspection questions. These services have strengthened over time to better meet the needs of children and young people, and are having a positive impact on their outcomes.

The education senior management team meetings provide suitable opportunities for education leaders to monitor progress against planned activity. However, the quality of improvement planning and evaluation within the education directorate is too variable. Plans do not always include suitable success criteria, and evaluations therefore focus too often on whether actions have been completed rather than the impact they have had on improving provision and outcomes for learners. In

mitigation, senior managers have a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses in their services areas than is reflected in planning and self-evaluation documentation.

Performance management processes in the local authority are suitably established and used to support officers and hold them to account. Officers have access to monthly support sessions and regularly review progress against targets set. Despite this, performance management targets are not consistently precise enough and do not always identify the specific aspects of practice that officers need to improve. As a result, performance management processes are not aligned consistently with evaluation and improvement work, and accountability does not always focus on the most important aspects of officers' work.

There are suitable examples of officers accessing useful professional learning to improve aspects of their work, such as managing staff and supporting their well-being. However, the local authority does not have a strategic enough approach to planning or evaluating the impact of professional learning across the directorate.

The local authority has strengthened working relationships with its regional school improvement service (EAS). As a result, officers in inclusion services are working more closely with school improvement partners to provide a holistic approach to supporting schools. The local authority has recently improved the way it holds EAS to account for operational aspects of their work, for example when considering the usefulness of notes from school visits by school improvement partners.

Leaders make appropriate decisions when they are concerned about the progress of schools. For example, the authority has issued warning notices to a few schools that were causing concern and used its powers to appoint additional governors. In a few cases, the progress that schools causing concern make is too slow and the local authority is not sufficiently challenging school leaders, the work of EAS or holding its own officers to account for the impact of actions in these schools.

Elected members, through scrutiny, carry out their duties diligently. They regularly challenge and scrutinise decisions and officers respond promptly to their requests. They have a good working knowledge of the local authority and the members briefings have provided them with suitable professional learning, which has improved the way in which they hold the local authority to account for its work. However, due to the weaknesses in evaluation across the directorate, members are not always provided with a clear enough picture of the strengths and areas for improvement across the directorate. This limits their ability to hold the local authority and the EAS to account for all aspects of their work.

Officers and elected members are committed to safeguarding young people in their local authority. There is an appropriate safeguarding culture within the local authority. All officers and elected members receive suitable safeguarding training. The way in which education and children's services work together has contributed well to improving multi-agency working and the support schools receive to manage the needs of pupils and their families more effectively. The advice and guidance provided to schools by officers is valued by school leaders and helps them to respond to safeguarding concerns appropriately. Elected members are beginning to develop

their understanding of safeguarding in education and challenge appropriately the content of reports they receive.

The authority's prioritisation of education is reflected in its allocation funding for education further above its Indicator Based Assessment than most local authorities in Wales. It also increased funding to schools this year by a higher percentage than the Welsh average. The authority also budgeted for the highest spend per pupil of all authorities in Wales this year. The authority delegates a higher percentage of its education budget to schools than many other Welsh local authorities. To support the improvement of school buildings, the authority has also allocated nearly £7million of its capital funding over 2019-2025 for Band B of its 21st Century Schools programme.

The authority has a track record of spending within its education budget in recent years, with relatively small underspends for the past three years against the overall education budget. The authority is projecting a small overspend this year and understands its key current and future budget pressures for education that include energy costs and home-to-school transport.

Overall, schools' balances increased in the three years prior to the pandemic. None of the authority's schools were in deficit at the end of last year. In common with other local authorities, total schools' balances have increased significantly during the pandemic due to additional grant funding but the authority anticipates that schools' balances will reduce by the end of this year, and in future years. The authority has applied its scheme for schools' financing where schools were in deficit prior to the pandemic. In previous years, deficit reduction plans were in place for a very few schools, although some actions were appropriately not taken during the pandemic.

The authority provides a comprehensive range of service level agreements (SLAs) for a range of services it provides for schools, such as catering and cleaning. Feedback from headteachers on some SLAs was mixed when the authority surveyed schools as part of a review of SLAs last year. SLAs were revised to take account of feedback and there is subsequently a high level of take-up for 2022-2025.

The School Budget Forum is generally well attended by headteachers and engaged in helpful activity such as reviewing the schools' funding formula and SLAs. The authority makes use of comparative data to inform reviews of its school funding formula, for example the re-allocation of some funding from primary to secondary schools. The funding formula was reviewed for each of the last two years.

Many headteachers agree that the authority provides good support for schools with their financial planning and nearly all agree that the authority provides schools with good human resources support.

The authority monitors appropriately the delivery of commissioned services, and key commissioned services, including the EAS and Aneurin Leisure Trust, have been discussed at scrutiny committee.

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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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