



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

**A report on the quality of local authority education
services for children and young people**

in

**Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Municipal Offices
Civic Centre
Ebbw Vale
Gwent
NP23 6XB**

May 2011

by

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

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on their capacity to improve.

In these evaluations, we use a four-point scale:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Unsatisfactory

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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Context

Blaenau Gwent consists of three distinct valleys to the north of Newport in the south-east of Wales. It is characterised by a close association between densely urbanised communities and large tracts of open countryside. Historically, the heavy industries of steel manufacture and coal mining dominated the area. However, with the demise of these industries, the area has experienced high rates of unemployment and a high incidence of social deprivation. The current level of statutory school age pupils entitled to free school meals is 29.6% and the Welsh average is 18.9%. This is the highest level of free school meal entitlement in Wales.

There are 16 council wards in Blaenau Gwent represented by 42 elected councillors. The ruling group is Independent. All but four wards are among the 100 most deprived in Wales and the whole of the county borough has been designated as an Objective One Priority Regeneration area.

Blaenau Gwent is the third smallest unitary authority in Wales and has a decreasing population, currently 68,630. Less than 1% of the population are from minority ethnic groups and 9.5% are Welsh speakers.

Funding

The Welsh Assembly Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council for 2010-2011 was £1,853 per head of population. This was the highest level of SSA per head in Wales. The council set its overall revenue budget at 103.9% of SSA, resulting in continuing high levels of Council Tax.

In 2010-2011, the council set its education budget above the level of the notional education component within the SSA. This produced an education budget of £5,487 per pupil net of grants, well above the Welsh average of £4,816 per pupil and the highest of local authorities in Wales.

Welsh Assembly Government figures show that the authority delegates 76% of the available education budget to schools, slightly above the Welsh average of 75%. It produces average delegated budgets of £4,204 per pupil in primary schools and £4,617 per pupil in secondary schools, including grants. These figures are well above the Welsh average of £3,698 per pupil for primary schools and £4,194 per pupil for secondary schools.

Adding to this the funding that is managed centrally, the cost of primary school education in Blaenau Gwent amounts to £4,740 per primary school pupil, compared with an average across Wales of £4,415. Secondary school education costs £5,371 per pupil, which is well above the Wales average of £4,726.

Summary

Overall judgement: Unsatisfactory

The local authority's education services for children and young people are unsatisfactory because:

- children and young people do not make good progress and standards are well below what is expected;
- support for school improvement and additional learning needs (ALN) is unsatisfactory; and
- systemic failure of management has resulted in the authority providing poor value for money.

Capacity to improve: Unsatisfactory

The local authority has unsatisfactory prospects for improvement because:

- senior officers and elected members of successive administrations have provided unsatisfactory leadership that has not challenged underperformance and poor outcomes for learners effectively;
- managers do not make effective use of data to evaluate the impact of initiatives or to inform the targeting of resources to learners with the greatest need; and
- leaders and managers have a track record of slow and incomplete responses to recommendations from successive Estyn inspection reports.

Recommendations

In order to secure the improvements that are needed, the local authority should:

- R1 implement improvement strategies and specific actions to raise skills levels and secure better outcomes for learners at all key stages and in the youth support service;
- R2 develop a clearly communicated strategy to challenge schools more robustly and provide prioritised support for schools according to need;
- R3 improve the use of data and management information to:
- identify and challenge underperformance in schools; and
 - evaluate the effectiveness of provision both within the education service and across partnerships serving children and young people;
- R4 increase pupil attendance rates in all schools;
- R5 work with partners to secure sustainable improvements in the percentage of post 16 learners in full time education, training or employment;
- R6 improve the function of scrutiny arrangements in relation to holding the Council Executive to account for the performance of local authority services and holding headteachers to account for the performance of individual schools;
- R7 improve provision for learners with additional learning needs by:
- establishing clear criteria for allocating support; and
 - making robust use of performance data to inform and plan provision strategically; and
- R8 work with the Local Service Board to secure appropriate accountability from all partners.

What happens next?

Blaenau Gwent local authority will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 50 working days of receipt of the report.

Estyn is of the opinion that the authority falls into the follow-up category of requiring special measures and will inform the Welsh Government of this recommendation.

During all core inspections, the inspection team considers whether a local authority needs any follow-up activity.

There are five types of follow-up activity:

1. Good practice case study
2. Link inspector monitoring
3. Estyn monitoring visit
4. Significant improvement

5. Special measures

Any follow-up inspection work will be planned in consideration of other inspection and regulatory activity within an authority. All follow-up inspections will be fed into the Local Authority Regulatory Calendar to avoid duplication and take advantage of any opportunities to work more closely with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes? Unsatisfactory

Standards: Unsatisfactory

Performance in all key stages has been among the lowest in Wales over the last four years. Only in key stage 1 has performance generally increased at a faster rate than that of Wales, although from a very low base.

The proportion of pupils in Blaenau Gwent eligible for free-school-meals is the highest in Wales. However, even when the high level of free-school-meals is taken into account performance is well below average. When the performance of Blaenau Gwent schools is compared with that of similar schools in Wales, based on the percentage eligible for free-school-meals, performance in primary schools is below average with too many schools in the bottom 25% and well over half below the middle. Only one secondary school is in the top quarter. All of the others are below average, with the majority being in the bottom quarter.

In 2010, Blaenau Gwent did not meet any of the three Welsh Assembly Government expected benchmarks for performance in secondary schools. It has performed as well as the expected benchmark on only one indicator out of a possible 12 in the last four years.

Pupils' progress between primary and secondary schools is good in most indicators although the progress in English at key stage 3 and on the average wider points score at key stage 4 (comprising all externally approved qualifications at age 16) is below average. However, the progress made is from a low base and too many learners are not yet reaching the expected level. Reading attainment at key stages 1, 2 and 3 is poor.

The percentage of Blaenau Gwent learners leaving school without a recognised qualification remains the worst in Wales. The percentage of learners remaining in full-time education at 16 and the percentage not in full-time education, training or employment both improved in 2009. However, this improvement did not continue in 2010 and these figures are also among the worst in Wales.

In all key stages the gap in performance between boys and girls is larger than the average across Wales. In key stages 1 and 3 the gap is particularly wide. This is because boys' performance is much further below that of boys nationally than is the case for girls compared to girls across Wales.

Blaenau Gwent has relatively small numbers of pupils who are from vulnerable groups. These pupils tend to perform inconsistently and their outcomes are better at key stage 2 and key stage 3 than at key stage 1 and key stage 4.

Attainment in Welsh second language is improving, with an increasing number of learners being entered for qualifications at the end of key stage 4.

In 2009 only 12% of the young people involved with the local authority youth service achieved an accredited outcome. This is below the Wales average of 16%.

Wellbeing: Adequate

Since 2007, pupils' attendance in Blaenau Gwent primary schools has slowly got worse and remains amongst the worst in Wales, and is also slightly worse than its free-school-meals benchmark. In secondary schools, attendance levels are below the Wales average by 0.5 percentage points and slightly better than the authority's free-school-meals benchmark. Attendance is not improving at the rate being achieved across the rest of Wales. The gap between attendance in Blaenau Gwent and the Wales average has gradually increased over the past four years.

Exclusion rates for five days or less are improving but at a slower rate than across Wales and they remain below the Wales average. Exclusion rates for six days or more are better than the Wales average, and improving at a faster rate. The number of days lost from school by all fixed term exclusions is just below the Wales average.

In 2009, the number of young people attending youth support services provision (including the local authority youth service) is very good at 41% of the population (11-25).

Young people engage well in programmes that promote healthy lifestyles (including exercise and performing arts) and services that provide information, advice and support. Service monitoring and evaluation reports indicate that numbers of participants are increasing.

The number of young people in the youth justice system is reducing, with more young people successfully avoiding offending or re-offending. However, too many young people who have been involved with the Youth Offending Team do not continue into education and training after they leave school at 16.

Young people were involved in developing the Children and Young People's Plan and their views had a strong influence on setting its priorities. They contribute well to service planning and policy development. They raise awareness of young people's issues among key elected members and officers through their involvement in school councils, the youth forum and Children's Grand Council.

Key Question 2: How good is provision? Unsatisfactory
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Support for School Improvement: Unsatisfactory

The authority provides support and challenge to schools according to clearly laid down criteria in the partnership agreement between the local authority and its schools. However, the quality of this support and challenge is better at secondary level than at primary level. In primary schools, there is not a consistently robust challenge provided to drive improvements in standards. The quality of the work of link advisers is monitored by the head of service. However this is not rigorous enough and many notes of visit lack detail and do not always have sufficient focus on addressing areas for improvement. The authority provides a range of data to

schools. However, targets set as a result of interpreting this data are not always challenging enough.

The authority does not know all of its schools well enough. As a result, it has not been effective enough in identifying and supporting two primary schools and a pupil referral unit that have subsequently been placed a category of concern at inspection by Estyn in recent years. This is a significant number in an authority of its size. The authority was not aware of the issues which led to one of the schools being placed in special measures, from which it has only recently been removed.

The authority has many initiatives aimed at raising standards in literacy. However, improvements have not yet made a significant impact on very low reading standards in key stages 1, 2 and 3. There are fewer initiatives for numeracy and ICT and it is too early to judge their impact on outcomes for pupils. There is good support for the implementation of the Foundation Phase. The authority provides a wide range of choice and opportunity for 14 to 19-year-olds.

The authority provides an appropriate range of training opportunities for middle managers in primary schools. The equivalent training is taken up by more than half of secondary schools.

There are very few governor vacancies in Blaenau Gwent. The local authority is making good progress in addressing the training needs of governors. There is still a need to improve governors' confidence in holding headteachers to account more effectively for poor learner outcomes in their schools. In the past there has been very poor take up of training, but this is being addressed through direct, bespoke training to whole governing bodies.

Support for Additional Learning Needs: Unsatisfactory

The authority meets all statutory requirements regarding learners with additional learning needs.

There has been an increase in the number of learners with statements of special educational needs over the last three years and the percentage in Blaenau Gwent is higher at 3.7% than the Wales average of 3.1%. The number of learners educated in special classes or units is significantly higher at 35% of those with statements than the Welsh average of 20%.

A small percentage of parents and carers lack confidence in the local authority's capacity to meet the needs of learners during the transition period from key stage 2 to key stage 3. The number of appeals to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal in Wales increased significantly between April and September 2010. Consequently the authority introduced appropriate changes to the annual review process and developed better transition procedures for learners with additional learning needs. It is too soon to judge the impact of these developments.

The range of support and training for parents has improved. There are appropriate systems in place for measuring parents' perception of services, through the annual review process and the annual education psychology service parent perception surveys.

Leaders have a clear vision for this service area and have identified suitable areas for improvement. There has been an appropriate but very recent re-structuring of roles and responsibilities of senior officers within the service. They have identified strategic priorities including the need to improve outcomes for all learners with additional learning needs. However, progress in improvement has been slow since the last inspection.

The authority does not have criteria for ceasing existing statements. There are clear processes for learners with specific learning difficulties. However criteria for allocating and withdrawing support for other groups of learners are not as well-defined. As a result, the local authority does not know if all learners are appropriately placed or whether they receive the additional support they need to make good progress.

There is good support for some specific groups of learners, for example learners with specific learning difficulties and speech, language and communication difficulties.

The educational psychology service and the outreach support provided by the special school help school staff to give better support to learners.

The authority does not use robust performance data well enough in order to inform and plan provision strategically. Without such information they are not able to challenge schools effectively and consistently on the outcomes for all learners with additional learning needs.

Promoting Social Inclusion and wellbeing: Adequate

The local authority and its partners continue to improve the way services work together to support families through initiatives such as its pilot project 'Team around the Cluster', and its Health and Wellbeing Locality Groups. It is however too early to evaluate the impact of these developments on young people's inclusion and wellbeing.

There are local authority policy and guidance documents for improving pupil attendance, which clearly set out the respective responsibilities for the local authority, its officers, schools and governors. However, these have not yet had enough impact on improving learners' attendance levels.

Officers work well with schools to help them manage difficult pupil behaviour. The local authority and its schools are successfully reducing longer fixed term exclusions, and have avoided permanent exclusions in all but the most difficult cases.

The local authority undertakes an annual analysis of the performance of pupils identified as being part of vulnerable groups. Yet the authority does not use this data fully to evaluate provision and informing future planning.

Although there are multi-agency support structures in place to help looked-after children, the educational attainment of these young people is not good enough.

Overall there is little use of outcome evidence for evaluation and planning purposes across the local authority services, in order to target work effectively. Predominantly the evaluation measure is the type and number of projects available. This measure goes some way to demonstrating a good service range, and a variety of opportunities for people to have their needs met. However, there are few measures that support any secure judgements about the difference that these services are making to the wellbeing of learners in Blaenau Gwent.

Young people have good access to a range of professional support, guidance and counselling, and good access to targeted sport and leisure activities. The local authority youth service's managers are improving their use of management information system to target youth support services work. However, it still has some way to go before data is used to best effect.

The authority has clear safeguarding policy and procedures. There are effective systems to ensure that all education staff are CRB checked and receive appropriate safeguarding training.

Access and school places: Good

The authority is working well to plan the reduction of surplus places, manage falling pupil numbers in the secondary and sixth form sectors and to improve school buildings.

The authority has begun its programme for the reorganisation of schools. It has closed one secondary school and successfully moved pupils to Abertillery Comprehensive school. It has also improved facilities in that school.

It is currently closing two more secondary schools and two primaries in the Ebbw Vale area. Pupils will move to a new 3-16 school at Ebbw Vale in September 2012. The new provision will include an integrated children centre, sports complex and a new site for the authority's special school. In addition the authority is to transfer all sixth form provision in the county borough to a new post-16 facility on the same site, managed by Coleg Gwent.

The authority has good plans in place for reorganising primary schools. It has closed one primary school since the last inspection and built a new Welsh medium primary school. Also the authority has federated two primary schools under a single governing body.

National data for the three years from 2008 to 2010 shows that the authority's ranking with regards to surplus places is improving slightly at primary level but worsening at secondary level. As a result of reorganising schools, the authority predicts that it should significantly reduce surplus places. Nevertheless, surplus capacity remains a challenge for the authority.

The authority has appropriate processes in place to prioritise major repairs and maintenance and to create extra capital resources. However, it has not convinced schools that it consults them well enough in the prioritisation process.

The authority plans provision well for early years and play.

Through the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP), the local authority works satisfactorily with a range of partners to ensure an appropriate range of youth support services. Young people can access a wide variety of these services to meet a range of needs, including education and skills, advice and guidance and recreational and social provision.

Officers make good links to Blaenau Gwent's strategy for skills and economic regeneration and have begun to help parents to access skills training and start new businesses.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management? Unsatisfactory

Leadership: Unsatisfactory

Previous administrations in Blaenau Gwent avoided taking the difficult decisions needed to address significant shortcomings. However, to date, this administration has begun to lay foundations for improving educational standards and provision for children and young people. It is too soon for this work to have made any significant change to the very poor outcomes for learners in the authority

There is clear linkage between the community strategy, partnership and service plans and policies. The priority for improving very low standards in education is clear. Lead officers and elected members state that they are now determined to turn around underperformance. One example of this change is evidenced by the recent change in role of the Director of Education who will now sit alongside the other corporate directors in the corporate management team.

Even now however, not all elected members and school leaders endorse the strategies chosen by the Council and its officers to bring about sustained improvements. Some have been slow to engage in the transformation process and some have actively worked to organise local opposition to improvement proposals. It is not clear that all the authority's secondary headteachers are fully engaged in and supportive of ambitious plans to address unacceptable underperformance.

There is a history of instability in the leadership of education services. Learners have not been served well by the rapid turnover of senior staff and shifting priorities and strategies. There is no track record of consistent and sustained service improvement.

The scrutiny of performance in education by elected members has too often been sidetracked by political point scoring. This has meant that officers and headteachers who have failed to address poor standards have not been called properly to account.

Similarly, school governors have not challenged underperformance effectively and have not held headteachers to account. Lead Members of the administration and the opposition accept the need to raise the level of robust challenge to schools.

Quality improvement: Unsatisfactory

Stakeholders, including elected members, governors and headteachers, engaged well in the preparation of the self-evaluation report. However, the report is not evaluative enough and is too descriptive. It lacks strategic analysis and robust evaluation of outcome data. Self-evaluation is not yet embedded in the routine work of the directorate.

Performance management measures generally indicate how much the authority is doing but do not always clearly show whether anyone will benefit if objectives are achieved. The authority is developing an outcome-focused approach supported by a training programme. It has already been adopted effectively by the early years service. However, it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

The Children and Young People's Partnership is not yet holding all its partners fully to account. It has recently adopted a results-based accountability framework and improved planning with clearer expectations. This is an appropriate improvement but it is also too early to evaluate its impact.

The authority has started to make effective use of Ffynnon, the pan-Wales performance management system, to collect, manage and report data. However, although it is used to report progress against corporate improvement plan objectives and outcome agreement targets the system is not yet embedded across all services.

The data development group is working to improve the co-ordination and analysis of performance data. However, again it is too early to assess the impact of this work.

Members and senior managers support the authority's participation in the regional consortium as a means of improving capacity and using best practice to raise standards in schools. To date, however, there is no evidence to show that collaboration has enhanced educational opportunities for learners.

Progress against the recommendations from previous inspection reports has been generally slow with the notable exception of planning school places.

Partnership working: Adequate

There is a range of appropriate partnerships in place to deliver the services and opportunities young people need. These include partnerships with the health board, youth offending team, voluntary organisations, social services and Gwent Police. Strategic objectives for these partnerships are set out clearly in the Community Plan and the Children and Young People's Plan. There are strong links between the priorities in these plans and other authority plans, such as the health, poverty and regeneration plans.

There is an increasing level of trust amongst partners and this is leading to better joint planning and resourcing of services. The partnership is developing better commissioning processes and is applying value for money principles to existing services. These have led to the decommissioning of a small number of services that are not performing well enough.

The local service board is the principal monitoring body for the Community Strategy and receives reports from its partnerships such as Families First. However, the authority is not always aware of the impact of the work of its partnerships. The Children and Young People's Partnership works well to make sure that young people can access a wide range of youth support services which meet their needs. These include education and skills, advice and guidance and recreational and social needs. However, evaluation of the impact of these services on particular groups of learners is at an early stage of development.

The local authority's own work-based learning provider is an effective partner in the delivery of vocational courses and apprenticeship programmes for young people, particularly those who are in danger of disengaging from education and training. Partnership working with Coleg Gwent has improved significantly. They are working together well to improve post-16 education and training and to develop the Ebbw Vale Learning Zone.

The authority has good arrangements in place to consult with young people and involve them in developing services.

Resource management: Unsatisfactory

The allocation of financial resources to education reflects the importance given to the service. School transformation projects are priorities of the local authority. Additional funding has been obtained from the 'invest to save' fund and resources have been directed to priority areas such as literacy. The schools' budget has been partially protected from budget cuts.

Although the authority has the highest total education expenditure per pupil in Wales, standards are unsatisfactory. The delegated ALN budget is the third highest in Wales. Because the authority does not know whether all learners are appropriately placed, it cannot demonstrate that the budget is used effectively to meet the needs of learners.

Robust service budget monitoring arrangements are in place. Significant overspends are rigorously monitored and funded from corporate resources or departmental budgets. Schools' reorganisation has meant high retirement costs but these are managed appropriately. A minority of schools have reserves of 5% or more. A few schools have reserves of 10% or more. Schools with excessive reserves and deficits are challenged but the authority needs to focus further on reducing the high reserves in some schools.

Schools receive a good range of support services, which are subject to annual satisfaction surveys. Service level agreements provide clarity on service levels, cost and quality.

There has been progress in improving performance management but overall data collection and reporting is fragmented. Consequently the authority cannot be sure that its resources are targeted effectively.

Workforce development is effectively supported by a competency-based performance management framework, although this is not yet fully embedded. The attendance management policy has been rolled out to school staff and has successfully reduced their absence rates.

The department uses external funding, partnerships and collaborative arrangements to deliver some provision efficiently and effectively. Schools are satisfied with services procured through the regional consortium and SLAs are in place.

The authority has undertaken some evaluation of its services but it cannot consistently demonstrate that it has used its resources effectively to achieve good outcomes and improve standards. Value for money is therefore unsatisfactory.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

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