



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

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

in

**Denbighshire County Council
County Hall
Wynnstay Road
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January/February 2012

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

Context

Denbighshire is located in North East Wales. It is bordered by Wrexham and Flintshire to the east, Conwy and Gwynedd to the west and Powys to the south. The total population is 96,731.

In Denbighshire, 30.4% of people over the age of three say they can speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 24.8%.

The employment rate in Denbighshire is 67.6%, compared to the Wales average of 66.4%. Fifteen per cent of children live in workless households. Of the working population in Denbighshire, 11.8% have no qualifications, which is lower than the Wales average of 13.7%.

The percentage of pupils of compulsory school age who are eligible for free school meals is 18.9%. This is lower than the national figure of 19.7%. This level of eligibility is the 13th lowest in Wales compared to other local authorities, where first is the lowest free-school-meals figure and 22nd is the highest (PLASC 2011). Only 10 of the 58 areas in Denbighshire are now among the 10% most deprived areas in Wales.

As of 31 March 2010, Denbighshire had 175 children being looked after by the authority. There were 75 children on the Child Protection register.

Ethnic minorities account for 1.7% of the population, which is lower than the Wales average of 3.6%

Financial context

The Welsh Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA)¹ per head of population for Denbighshire for 2011-2012 was £1,785, the sixth highest in Wales, and this reflects a continued increase compared to the average. The council set its overall revenue budget at 101.6% of the SSA reflecting the above-average level of Council Tax.

The council set the education budget at a level of 100.8% of the notional education component within the SSA. This produced an education budget net of grants of £4,870 per pupil, a little above the Welsh average of £4,791. The net education budget decreased by 2.9% on the previous year compared to a Wales average decrease of 0.4%.

Welsh Government figures show that the authority delegates 79.1% of the available budget to schools. This is above the Welsh average of 76.2% and the third highest, although the high level of income received from other authorities for teaching pupils

¹ SSA is the means by which the Welsh Government distributes Revenue Support Grant to local authorities

with statements of SEN in Denbighshire schools tends to inflate the reported delegation rate.

The average delegated budgets of £3,868 per pupil in primary schools and £4,315 per pupil in secondary schools, including grants, are slightly above the Welsh average of £3,821 per pupil for primary schools and £4,272 per pupil for secondary schools.

The budget for primary education amounts to £4,387 per primary school pupil, a little below the average across Wales of £4,452. Similarly, the secondary school budget including non-delegated costs is £4,626 per pupil, a little below the Wales average of £4,752.

Summary

Overall judgement: Good

Current performance is good because:

- performance has improved in all key stages, particularly in key stage 4;
- performance has improved against the Welsh Government's expected benchmarks based on free-school-meal entitlement;
- attendance in primary and secondary schools is good and compares well to that of similar schools elsewhere;
- the number of exclusions has reduced and the overall number of days lost to exclusion is the lowest in Wales;
- the authority has very good arrangements to support and challenge schools and knows its schools very well;
- support for school improvement, additional learning needs and social inclusion are all good;
- the number of Denbighshire schools requiring follow-up after an inspection is among the lowest in Wales;
- the authority has made good progress in delivering its Modernising Education programme;
- the culture of very strong leadership from elected members and senior officers has driven significant change and improvement at a good pace; and
- value for money is good in education services.

However:

- teacher assessments of the core subjects in key stage 3 are not moderated precisely enough to make sure they accurately reflect learners' standards.

Capacity to improve: Good

Prospects for improvement are good because:

- effective and coherent leadership from senior officers and elected members working together has already driven significant change and improvement in education services and in outcomes for learners;
- performance data is used rigorously to evaluate the quality and impact of services, identify underperformance and plan for improvement;
- a culture of accountability and continuous review, with a consistent focus on achieving progress against priorities, is firmly embedded throughout the authority's services;
- scrutiny arrangements are highly effective in challenging underperformance and holding officers and schools to account;
- priorities for education and aspirational targets are clearly linked through strategic and operational plans; and
- the authority has already achieved significant efficiency savings and focused resources on its key priorities.

However:

- the authority does not gather and analyse enough data to measure and evaluate performance of combined partnership work.

Recommendations

In order to continue to improve, Denbighshire County Council needs to:

R1 improve the accuracy of teacher assessments at end of key stage 3; and

R2 identify all services for children and young people in Denbighshire and establish an effective system to measure the impact of these services to help the authority and its partners know whether these offer good value for money.

What happens next?

Denbighshire County Council will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 70 days (50 working days) of receipt of the report.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes? Good

Standards: Good

In Denbighshire, levels of free-school-meals and other deprivation measures have increased at a faster rate than across Wales in the last three years. Despite this, performance has also improved at a faster rate than across Wales in both key stages 2 and 4 during this time. Key stage 3 performance kept pace with that across Wales until 2010, although it improved more slowly in 2011. In 2011, the percentages of learners gaining the core subject indicator in key stages 2 and 4 were above the all-Wales average. This compares better to other authorities than could be expected when contextual information is taken into account. However, in key stages 1 and 3 performance dropped below Welsh averages.

When compared to that of similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, performance in 2011 was well above average in key stage 2 and below average in key stage 3. Performance in key stage 4 improved significantly in 2011 and was good. On most indicators there are more schools than average in the top 25% of similar schools and fewer than expected in the bottom 25%. On one of the five main indicators, half of the authority's schools are in the top 25%.

Denbighshire's performance against the Welsh Government's benchmarks for performance based on free-school-meal entitlement has improved over the last four years. Provisional data suggests that in 2011 the authority exceeded both the benchmarks for key stage 4.

Overall, progress between primary and secondary schools is good.

In 2011, the gap in performance on the core subject indicator between boys and girls was less than the average for Wales at all key stages. Particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, generally attain their expected levels. Learners make good progress in gaining skills in first and second language Welsh and generally achieve good standards in both subjects.

The percentage of learners leaving primary school with functional literacy improved in 2011 and is better than the average across Wales. Learners who receive support to improve their literacy and numeracy skills make good progress and many maintain this improvement to end of the key stage.

In 2010, the percentage of learners leaving full-time education without any recognised qualification improved and is similar to the Welsh average. Most learners engaged with the Youth Service make steady progress and gain appropriate non-formal qualifications across a range of areas.

Wellbeing: Good

Standards of wellbeing are generally good.

Many learners participate well in a range of programmes that promote their health and wellbeing. They are increasingly involved in sports activities and their levels of participation compare well to those of learners in other authorities. Learners develop strategies and skills to help them stay safe through successful initiatives that help them understand the benefits of healthy eating, the risks of smoking and the need for road safety. These programmes enable them to improve their knowledge and develop appropriate attitudes and beliefs.

Attendance is good and has improved. When compared to similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, about two thirds of primary schools are in the top 25%. Secondary school attendance is also good. When compared to similar schools, over 60% are above average.

There are very few permanent exclusions. The rate of shorter exclusions has been one of the highest in Wales although unverified data suggests that the rate reduced significantly in 2011. The number of days lost due to exclusion is the fewest in Wales.

The percentage of Year 11 learners not in education, training or employment has decreased steadily in recent years and is better than the average for Wales. The percentage of learners continuing in full-time education improved in 2010 and is also better than the Welsh average.

Children and young people contribute well to the development of service planning and policy. They use a good range of formal processes and specific events well to influence decision-making.

Key Question 2: How good is provision? Good
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Support for school improvement: Good

Support for school improvement has improved significantly since the last inspection. The authority's school improvement and inclusion services have recently been restructured under one head of service. This restructuring has considerably strengthened joint working between officers within the authority and is helping to improve the achievement of all learners.

The authority has very good arrangements to support and challenge schools, and knows its schools very well. Data is analysed thoroughly and used effectively to challenge progress and target interventions. Officers evaluate thoroughly the quality of leadership and management in schools and compare these with headteachers' own evaluations. As a result, the rigour and consistency of officers' and members' challenge to leadership and management in schools contribute well to improving standards. Challenge is a very strong feature of the authority's work. At the time of the authority's inspection the number of Denbighshire schools requiring follow-up after an inspection is among the lowest in Wales.

The authority has reviewed its Partnership Agreement with schools. The Agreement sets out clear criteria to define an appropriate level of support and intervention. Good procedures also exist to identify areas of specific risk and respond effectively to

them. As a result, officers accurately identify schools needing additional support leading to a steady improvement in standards. Systematic weakness in school leadership and management is addressed effectively to make sure that schools improve quickly enough.

The authority has an effective range of initiatives that focus on raising standards in priority areas such as literacy. These interventions for targeted groups of learners are successful in improving learners' functional literacy. Interventions to raise standards in numeracy also have a positive impact. However, teacher assessments of the core subjects at the end of key stage 3 are not moderated consistently enough between schools to make sure that they accurately reflect pupils' achievement.

The authority gives a high priority to improving effective leadership at all levels in its schools. Training programmes, network groups and other support for senior leaders, middle managers and governors have delivered identifiable improvements. Governors now understand better how to use the core data sets to evaluate and challenge school performance.

Support for additional learning needs: Good

Statutory processes in Denbighshire are effective. Rigorous systems for moderating requests for additional support have resulted in a reduction in the number of statements of special educational needs issued. Good relationships and communication with parents and schools help keep the number of referrals to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales consistently low, with just one appeal conceded since 2009.

The authority educates just over half of the learners with statements in mainstream schools, with most of these pupils attending mainstream classes with their peers. This means that most learners are educated near to their own home. Very few learners attend independent special schools, enabling the authority to spend nearly all the special needs budget on learners in its own schools.

Denbighshire School Improvement and Inclusion Service plans and provides services to pupils with additional learning needs in a cohesive manner. Services are co-ordinated to ensure that pupils benefit from the services provided. The authority keeps careful records of all pupils' progress, although work to monitor the impact of the service on pupils' performance is not yet fully mature.

Good joint work with partner agencies provides appropriate early identification, assessment and intervention, particularly in pre-school and early years. Effective planning for school placement, including well trained support, helps pupils settle smoothly into school.

The authority has a good track record of providing a comprehensive range of suitable training. It responds well to requests from schools for specialist advice and support. This has developed the capacity of schools to meet a broader range of pupils' needs. However, not all schools are making the best use of the expertise they have developed.

Worthwhile outreach services from the special schools are helping to maintain pupils in mainstream schools across key stages. These services build on the success of earlier work supported by a grant from the Welsh Government. The schools are beginning to work together to develop a consistent framework for evaluating the success of this provision, based on the Quality Assurance Framework developed by the Welsh Government.

Accurate evaluation of the impact of services is helping the authority to identify how best to focus additional support. On the basis of this evaluation and the effective accredited training for support staff and teachers in mainstream schools, the authority has been able to close two resourced provisions and now provides speech and language services support for pupils to attend at their local mainstream schools.

Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing: Good

The authority has implemented a range of appropriate strategies that have improved learners' behaviour, attitudes and attendance. There are appropriate initiatives to make sure that all young people attend school regularly, including young carers and young parents. Officers collect and analyse data on attendance well and use this information to target support where it is needed. The authority works well with its schools to manage pupils with challenging behaviour and this has resulted in a reduction in the number of days lost through exclusions. The authority uses its legal powers well to prosecute parents if necessary in order to improve pupils' attendance.

Officers support schools well in developing appropriate policies to tackle bullying and raise awareness of all forms of cyber-bullying. However, the authority does not have robust systems to collect data on bullying in order to evaluate the effectiveness of its support to schools.

The authority has a range of appropriate support for vulnerable pupils. This includes the Education Provision in College scheme where Year 11 pupils follow vocational programmes in local colleges. These strategies have contributed to reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training in Denbighshire.

The authority meets its statutory duties in respect of looked-after children well. It works well with other agencies to make sure that looked-after children achieve very well and continue with their education and training after leaving school.

The local authority youth service has realigned its priorities and resources effectively to provide better services, opportunities, personal support and outcomes for learners. The service and its partners have a leading role in the development of youth support services across the authority.

The authority has appropriate policies and procedures in place to safeguard learners. In addition, through the local safeguarding children's board and other partnerships, the authority makes sure that the partners that provide services on its behalf also have effective procedures in place.

Access and school places: Good

The authority has made good progress in delivering its Modernising Education programme. It has agreed an appropriate framework for school reorganisation and is

delivering this framework through an effective process of area reviews. The authority has already made good progress in addressing its identified priorities to increase Welsh medium provision and to reduce surplus capacity.

Officers keep asset management surveys up-to-date and use these to prioritise maintenance. The authority is well placed to deliver its plans for 21st century schools.

Central admissions provide good information to parents. The service works particularly well with schools and other services to make sure that vulnerable pupils are supported to reintegrate promptly.

A rigorous service review has improved the authority's capacity to make sure that there is enough early years provision available across the county. The authority has made good use of surplus places in schools to accommodate Flying Start provision. Joint working with partners is now good and continuing to improve, and officers systematically monitor and evaluate the work of all providers. The authority has robustly evaluated its range of play provision.

The authority's youth service is leading work with relevant partners based in local areas to improve access to a range of youth support services.

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

Leadership: Excellent

Elected members and senior officers in Denbighshire make education services for children and young people a high priority. They have a clear vision and high aspirations for the authority and communicate these very well. The coherent and effective leadership means that the council's approach to becoming a 'high performing council, closer to the community' is already making a positive difference.

The council has reorganised its scrutiny arrangements into three committees for partnerships, communities and performance and all services report different aspects of their work to the relevant committee. As a result, scrutiny members have a better overview across the whole council and a wider range of members understand education issues. Members are now able to compare and challenge services more effectively and make better informed decisions. In addition, cross-party involvement in scrutiny means that all members can work towards a common goal in improving services for children and young people. Partners within the local service board also bring their contributions to delivering outcomes within partnership plans to scrutiny.

The transformational changes at member level are reflected in the Corporate Executive Team where three corporate directors have whole-authority responsibilities. They manage a group of heads of service but do not have directorates. As a result, they have a better understanding of all corporate priorities. This leads to purposeful and effective collaboration between services. Priorities for education are consistently presented across service areas with clear links between strategic plans and operational plans. Officers set appropriate aspirational targets to improve outcomes for children and young people.

This transformation in the way that the authority works has given greater focus to corporate strategic priorities and has overcome previous service silos. The changes in the culture and leadership of the authority, together with very strong leadership from elected members and senior officers, have driven significant change and continuous improvement at a fast pace. This has enabled the authority to recover very well from failings identified during previous inspections. This is sector-leading practice.

Members and senior officers have a track record of making difficult decisions in order to improve provision for learners. There is a culture of transparency and openness within the local authority and this has led to excellent relationships between members and officers, and with external partners.

The local authority has mature relationships with its schools. Relationships with headteachers have improved significantly since previous inspections and the authority consults well with its schools. The School Standards Monitoring Group, consisting of both members and officers, brings effective support and challenge to headteachers and governing bodies. They make a strong contribution to improving leadership, provision and standards in schools.

The authority has taken the successful practices developed locally and is sharing this good practice beyond its boundaries.

Quality improvement: Good

The authority has firmly embedded self-evaluation throughout its services. There is a culture of accountability and continuous review and a consistent focus on achieving progress against priorities. The authority has a robust evaluation framework, including twice-yearly performance challenges by key elected members and senior officers which link to improvement planning and the setting of challenging targets. Performance reporting to elected members is good and the authority has an open culture where areas for improvement are acknowledged and addressed. Elected members and senior officers understand well the strengths and shortcomings in service areas and challenge officers robustly to bring about improvement. As a result, for example, performance at key stage 4 in Denbighshire secondary schools and attendance in both primary and secondary schools have all improved.

The authority consults well with children and young people and the wider community. It has commissioned a series of useful independent reports to evaluate the quality of its work with partners. Performance data is used rigorously to evaluate the quality and impact of services, identify underperformance and plan for improvement. Initiatives are evaluated systematically using first-hand evidence and performance data. At present the authority does not gather and analyse enough relevant data to fully measure performance across all partners, although developing this database is included in priorities for its current single plan.

Performance management arrangements are effective in bringing about improvement and staff have performance related targets clearly linked to strategic priorities.

Officers challenge underperforming schools well and the authority is willing to use its full range of statutory powers to bring about improvement where necessary. No school has been identified in a category of concern during an Estyn inspection for the last two years.

The authority has addressed well many of the recommendations from previous Estyn inspections of education and youth support services. Ongoing work to fully meet other recommendations is a key action within The Big Plan.

The authority has established a good range professional learning communities to share good practice and raise standards. Many of these learning communities are appropriately focused on improving literacy and numeracy. The authority's evaluation of the impact of these groups has already identified improvements in teaching and learning and in learners' standards of achievement.

Footnote: Denbighshire, along with two other authorities is piloting the Single Integrated Plan, which aims to bring together all the authority's corporate plans into a single overarching document. Denbighshire's The Big Plan is an overarching strategy document for the next three years that integrates the Community Strategy, the Children and Young People's plan, the Health Social Care and Wellbeing strategy and the Community Safety plan.

Partnership working: Good

The authority is continuing to develop arrangements for collaboration and partnership with neighbouring councils and other organisations in order to secure improvements in learning outcomes for children and young people.

The authority has made significant changes to partnership working across four of the main strategic partnerships, and developed its single integrated plan, The Big Plan. As a result of extensive consultative work, there is good support and ownership of The Big Plan across communities, strategic partners and the authority.

The Big Plan has a specific focus to improve the processes and performance of the Children and Young People's Partnership. The authority has carried out rigorous reviews to identify priorities from all four of these plans to include in The Big Plan. One of these is the comprehensive performance review of the 2008-2011 Children and Young People's Plan 'Making a Difference'. This demonstrated outcomes from grant and project funded activities well. However, there was not enough focus on the analysis of outcomes to identify how well the work of the Children and Young People's Partnership had contributed to achieving its strategic objectives, or on planning for improvements.

A new Partnerships and Communities Team gives high levels of support to the developing Big Plan processes. The team is located within the Business Planning and Performance unit, and the head of the unit is a member of the Corporate Executive Team. This demonstrates well the authority's commitment to the change process, and makes sure that performance improvement is at the centre of the changes.

Since September 2011, Denbighshire and Conwy have one joint local service board. The board has appropriately commissioned a joint performance management framework for The Big Plan and One Conwy. Denbighshire County Council is working well with the five other authorities in North Wales to establish the Regional School Improvement Service for the area. Senior officers and elected members give very clear direction to this work to make sure it reflects their priority to improve outcomes for learners and continue the good progress the authority has already made.

Resource management: Good

Financial management is sound and supported well by a four-year medium-term plan and efficiencies programme. This has enabled the council to achieve significant efficiency savings and apply additional revenue and capital funding to its top priorities, including its 'Modernising Education' plan.

The authority has restructured various services effectively. This includes its Improvement and Inclusion service, which has achieved efficiency savings and re-focused the service to intervene in schools more effectively.

The authority and its schools have worked well to increase the level of delegation to schools and to improve the capacity of schools to manage resources more effectively. Action taken includes the appointment of finance managers for clusters of schools and the delegation to schools of additional funding and responsibility for premature retirement and redundancy. Service level agreements for services provided to schools have been revised to give clear information about quality, cost and responsibility. Although some of these measures are recent, there are early indications that they are helping schools to improve longstanding issues.

The authority has strengthened its arrangements to support schools in financial difficulties and improved the effectiveness of monitoring and management of recovery plans. Good progress has been made in developing workforce planning arrangements in the authority and for schools.

The authority robustly reviews and challenges its services annually to secure improvement and value for money. The authority has also appropriately reviewed the effectiveness and value for money of a range of specific projects and developments.

Overall value for money in education services is good. The budgets per pupil for both primary and secondary education are just below the Wales average, although attainment at most key stages is above average.

The authority is developing its arrangements to assess the outcomes and value for money from services commissioned from external agencies, although these are not yet in place for all such services.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

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Copies of the report

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Glossary of terms

National Curriculum

Expected National Curriculum levels

- By the end of the key stage 1, at the age of seven, learners are expected to reach level 2 and the more able to reach level 3.
- By the end of the key stage 2, at the age of eleven, learners are expected to reach level 4 and the more able to reach level 5.
- By the end of the key stage 3, at the age of fourteen, learners are expected to reach level 5 and the more able to reach level 6 or level 7.

Core subject indicator in all key stages

The core subject indicator relates to the expected performance in English or Welsh first language, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum. Learners must gain at least the expected level in either English or Welsh first language together with mathematics and science to gain the core subject indicator.

External examinations at key stage 4 or post-16

Core subject indicator – as above.

Level 1 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade D to G.

The Level 1 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grades D to G.

Level 2 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics – learners must have gained level 2 qualifications in English or Welsh first language and in mathematics as part of their threshold.

Level 3 qualification – the equivalent of an A level at A* to C.

The Level 3 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to two A levels at grade A* to E.

The **average wider points score** includes all external qualifications approved for use in Wales at the relevant age – for example at age 16 or 18. To calculate this, the total points gained by all learners in the cohort is divided by the number of learners.

The **capped average points score** only includes the best eight results for each pupil from all qualifications approved for use in Wales at age 16.

All-Wales Core Data sets

Schools and local authorities may refer to performance relative to their family of schools. These families of schools have been created to enable schools to compare their performance to similar schools across Wales. Families include schools with similar proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals, living in 20% most deprived areas of Wales, having special education needs at school action plus or statemented and with English as an additional language acquisition less than competent.