

Mr Stuart Rosser
Interim Chief Executive
Caerphilly County Borough Council
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26 March 2014

Dear Mr Rosser

Estyn Monitoring Visit 21-23 January 2014

Following Estyn's inspection of education services for children and young people in July 2012, the authority was identified as requiring follow-up through Estyn monitoring. A monitoring plan was subsequently agreed with your Estyn link inspectors. The first monitoring visit took place from 9-10 October 2013. The second and final monitoring visit took place from 21-23 January 2014. This letter records the final outcomes of Estyn's post-inspection monitoring.

In January 2014 Mrs Jane Taylor HMI led a team of three inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the remaining two of the five recommendations arising from the inspection, and to consider the overall performance of the authority against its post-inspection action plan.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers and partner representatives. Inspectors scrutinised documentation, including evidence on the progress made on each of Estyn's recommendations.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported their findings to you as the interim chief executive, and to the leader of the council, the cabinet member for education and lifelong learning, the director of education and lifelong learning, the manager for learning, education and inclusion and the principal system leader of the regional consortium.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

The authority has moved swiftly to address the recommendations from the 2012 Estyn inspection. During a period of significant change of senior management, the council has demonstrated a strong commitment to improve its education services for children and young people.

The leader, together with the cabinet member for education and lifelong learning, the interim chief executive, the director of education and lifelong learning and the regional consortia school improvement service, have ensured that this work has progressed well. The authority has established better foundations to continue the drive for improvements in attainment and achievement for all learners.

Caerphilly County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of July 2012.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is removing the local authority from further follow-up activity.

Recommendation 1: implement improvement strategies and specific actions to improve outcomes for learners especially at key stages 3 and 4

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Since the previous inspection in 2012, the local authority has made suitable progress in addressing this recommendation. Working closely with regional school improvement services it has developed a range of useful strategies and specific actions to improve outcomes for learners.

In particular the local authority has introduced a comprehensive target setting process that links school performance targets to the progress of individual learners. Schools are required to identify potential barriers to success for individual learners in years 10 and 11. The targets produced by schools are very challenging and clearly set the ambition for improvement across the authority. The target setting process leads to coordinated and well-resourced programmes of support for learners. There is a suitable focus on working with families of targeted learners and, where appropriate, support includes links to Communities First and Family First programmes. Regular meetings by regional and local authority officers with schools ensure that the progress made by these learners is monitored closely.

Additionally, the local authority has undertaken a review of 14-19 provision to ensure that the partnership delivers the best possible outcomes for learners. This work now has a strong focus on improving the curriculum and outcomes for vulnerable learners who often receive education otherwise than at school. The local authority is increasing opportunities for learners to gain accreditations through its youth support services.

Schools identified as needing support for English, Welsh first language or mathematics receive good curriculum support from regional officers. Classroom-based support for the teaching of mathematics has already helped to improve performance in priority schools. Schools benefit from a wide range of professional development opportunities to improve leadership at both senior and middle leader levels.

Performance in Caerphilly is strongest in the Foundation Phase and key stages 2 and 3 where outcomes are above average in nearly all indicators when compared with similar schools based on free school meal entitlement. At key stages 3 and 4,

the local authority met its Welsh Government's expected benchmarks in two out of three indicators in 2013. At key stage 4, performance of schools in Caerphilly compared to similar schools based on free school meal entitlement is above average for the indicators that include English or Welsh and mathematics. However, performance in the indicators that include a wide range of qualifications, that is the average capped points score and level 1 and level 2 threshold indicators, is below average. Overall, the local authority's improvement strategies to date have not yet impacted significantly on outcomes at key stage 4.

Recommendation 2: strengthen the level of challenge to its secondary schools

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority, in partnership with the regional school improvement service, has significantly improved processes to support, challenge and intervene in its secondary schools.

System leaders and local authority officers know their schools very well. Together, these officers make effective use of detailed data on the performance of every pupil to challenge underperformance and to target effective interventions. This data is used well to raise teachers' expectations for their pupils and to make sure that targets for attainment in key stages 3 and 4 are sufficiently challenging.

Senior officers in the authority work closely with lead officers in the regional school improvement service to make sure that there is a consistent and rigorous challenge to schools. They have developed a culture of mutual challenge which effectively holds all officers and schools to account for improvement. Quality assurance of the work of all officers is good and managers quickly identify and address any inconsistency or lack of challenge.

In general, system leaders classify secondary schools accurately according to risk and in order to plan appropriate interventions. Headteachers have a clear understanding of the category their school is in, as well as the support they will receive as a result including their own responsibility in bringing about improvement. System leaders work effectively with schools to hold senior and middle leaders to account.

Schools identified for intensive support have useful and comprehensive intervention plans outlining clearly the actions that they need to take. These plans, and the progress the school makes in implementing them, are challenged rigorously by the cabinet member for education and senior officers from both the authority and the regional consortium school improvement service. This includes a robust challenge to schools which are underperforming at key stage 4.

The quality of written records from visits to secondary schools has improved since the last inspection. These reports are now evaluative and clearly identify areas for improvement for schools and their governing bodies. Recent reviews of leadership and management are particularly useful and give clear messages to schools and their governing bodies about the issues that they need to address.

Support for literacy and numeracy in secondary schools is good. Officers from the regional consortium's literacy and numeracy teams provide termly meetings to improve the skills of subject leaders and to challenge them to improve the performance of their departments.

The regional consortium's school improvement service has provided schools with a comprehensive tool to evaluate and improve the quality of teaching. Schools using this resource are better able to monitor classroom practice and address underperformance.

The authority has provided useful training for governors in secondary schools to help them to better understand the performance of their schools. System leaders attend governing body meetings to report on leadership, provision and performance in the school. They also provide written reports for the governing body. As a result governors understand better the issues facing their schools and the areas in need of improvement.

Overall, the well-coordinated approach involving senior officers from the authority and lead officers from the regional consortium together with system leaders and curriculum support teams is now improving the quality of leadership and management at all levels in secondary schools.

Recommendation 3: improve the robustness of self-evaluation and target setting

This recommendation has been fully addressed.

Since the previous inspection in 2012 the local authority has made good progress in addressing this recommendation. It has developed appropriate self-evaluation and target setting process within the education and lifelong learning directorate.

The directorate has a clear annual planning cycle which is updated termly. This enables all staff to know what is required of them and when actions need to happen. Within this context, the strong emphasis on the setting, monitoring and evaluation of challenging targets for the directorate and for schools continues. Officers and lead staff in the authority receive appropriate training to help them to be more evaluative and less descriptive in their writing.

The authority has focused more closely on the systems and processes it needs to ensure that best use is made of all available data to strengthen the quality of self-evaluation. Improved analysis of data supports tracking systems well, and improved use of data helps the authority to track specific groups of learners better. These include those entitled to free school meals, looked-after children and other vulnerable groups. This work has also helped the authority to improve its monitoring of learners' attendance and performance.

All service managers, the senior management team, the cabinet member for education and lifelong learning and the corporate management team participate well in challenge meetings. Scrutiny committee receives appropriate progress reports against relevant plans and targets including the Estyn post-inspection action plan.

The cabinet member works closely with the director of education and lifelong learning and the senior management team. She attends senior management team meetings regularly and has a good overview of education issues. She is closely involved in the intervention planning process with senior education staff. This works well, ensuring that elected members can gain a good overview of performance at individual school level, and can provide appropriate challenge for school improvement more effectively.

Following useful training and regular staff meetings on data analysis and self-evaluation, lead officers in the authority are now re-evaluating their service areas and summarising their findings into succinct and useful reports. The lead officers are then challenged by their peers in newly established 'challenge meetings', in which they are scrutinised about the evidence for, and accuracy of, their judgements in these summative evaluation reports. This peer challenge is helping all lead officers to improve their self-evaluations and to incorporate appropriate action points into their service improvement plans.

As a result of this, lead officers are able to make more accurate judgements about their own service areas and have a sharper focus on areas for improvement. In addition, all lead officers have been involved in a challenge meeting with senior managers about standards. This is helping local authority officers to develop a greater clarity of purpose in how each part of the directorate can contribute to improving standards across the authority's services for children and young people. This is contributing to a greater level of trust in each other, allowing open and honest challenge to take place, leading to a growing culture of effective self-evaluation in the authority.

The local authority is increasing its challenge to secondary schools about the targets they set themselves for performance. For example, several schools had set targets that were too low for the proportion of Year 11 pupils that were expected to achieve the Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics. The authority is working with the regional school improvement consortium to develop targets based more closely on the schools' knowledge and expectations for each individual pupil.

As a result, a clearer focus on individual pupil performance is emerging, which has been adopted by all secondary headteachers, thereby ensuring a common understanding and consistent approach to target setting in all schools across the local authority. This shift in approach to target setting has led to significantly higher expectations of schools and of learners. However, it is too early to demonstrate the impact of this approach on outcomes for learners.

The local authority and the regional consortium's school improvement service have identified additional interventions with pupils in each school to help them achieve their targets. The manager for learning, education and inclusion is currently reviewing the 2013 results for all year 11 pupils with each headteacher, evaluating carefully the impact of interventions against targets and challenging under-performance robustly.

Recommendation 4: align corporate and partnership strategic planning processes in order to make best use of available resources to improve outcomes for children and young people

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Corporately, the authority has a strong focus on improving its planning processes and the work of the directorate and of the Improving Governance Programme Board supports this well.

The development of the Single Integrated Plan is impacting well on the progress of joint planning for better outcomes. Consistency between the directorate and the wider partnerships is clearer, with better links between key strategic documents.

The Estyn inspection report noted that planning processes were too complex, and that there was a lack of clarity about how well the plans of wider partnership arrangements linked with council priorities. It also noted that it was difficult to identify how well priorities were addressed because of the lack of consistency of agreed priorities across different plans.

Since then, the authority has made good progress in bringing about improvements in planning processes at corporate and directorate levels. Together with the improvements in self-evaluation, target setting, and performance management, this has a clear impact on the development of an authority-wide cultural change towards planning and performance management. This is designed to help officers and partners to gain a better understanding of the purpose of these processes and how to improve service delivery through effective use of them.

The senior leadership team of the education and lifelong learning directorate has driven significant changes to the planning of learning across the county borough, within the authority and with external partners. In one example, the manager for learning, education and inclusion in conjunction with the regional consortium's school improvement service has developed significant changes in approach to pupil monitoring with each secondary school. This is an interesting example of how the regional consortium's school improvement service and the local authority's inclusion services work together with schools to review individual learner progress and to plan jointly for improved learner outcomes. It is too early to judge the success of this approach.

At corporate level, the director of education and lifelong learning, who is also the acting deputy chief executive, has worked closely with the previous acting chief executive, the current interim chief executive and the corporate management team, to share the improvements in planning processes achieved in her directorate. This is successfully addressing the Estyn recommendation for improvement and also supports the changes necessary for the Single Integrated Plan, 'Caerphilly Delivers' well. A useful analysis of services has led to the development of a clear performance and delivery framework for 'Caerphilly Delivers'.

The education and lifelong learning directorate has established robust guidance for improvement planning. The guidance includes directorate improvement planning, service improvement plans and personal development reviews. These effectively align planning with performance, and help to enable all staff to understand their roles,

responsibilities and contributions towards corporate objectives. For example, the early years' service analysis shows that there is already a substantial positive impact from improved partnership planning and joint working.

Through the Children and Young People's Partnership, all partners have received a very useful guide to help them to understand self-evaluation better and their role within that process. It aims to enable them to self-evaluate their own contributions for children and young people in Caerphilly, at the level that suits them best. This gives all partners a useful foundation for future work with children and young people in Caerphilly County Borough.

Recommendation 5: take urgent action to reduce surplus capacity in schools generally and secondary schools in particular.

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the inspection, the local authority has made good progress in relation to the need to reduce surplus capacity in its primary and secondary schools.

Officers and elected members have given this work a high priority. The effective communication between officers and elected members has been a key feature as the proposals and plans have developed in the past year.

The local authority has established an effective cross party working group to consider the school reorganisation options and to prioritise the way ahead. This group considered the options over a ten week period and provided regular updates to the elected members through the education for life scrutiny committee, the cabinet and the full council.

The local authority carried out a comprehensive review of individual secondary school capacity and an update of the school asset management plan and the Schools Places Plan which provided the working group with the latest evidence to inform their work. The working group agreed on the key principles which they used to underpin their decision making. The updated documentation and detailed plans and proposals have helped the working group to give due consideration to the whole range of school reorganisation options and to make valid recommendations to the full council.

The local authority has secured the full support of the elected members to move the plans forward and acted decisively to implement the public consultation on the first phase of its secondary rationalisation programme. The authority is currently awaiting the outcome of that process. The proposals are underpinned well by a firm financial commitment by the local authority and the Welsh Government. The authority has projected, based on actual pupil numbers, that the rationalisation proposals will reduce surplus places to 16.9% across secondary schools and 11.9% across primary schools by September 2016.

Next steps

Your link inspectors will continue their work with the authority, in their normal link role.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and the Wales Audit Office for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Wales Audit Office
CCBC Director of Education and Lifelong Learning