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24 January 2013

Dear Dr Paterson

MONITORING VISIT TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ESTYN MONITORING FOLLOWING LAESCYP INSPECTION

Following the outcome of the inspection of education services for children and young people in November 2010, the authority was identified as requiring an Estyn monitoring visit as follow-up to the inspection. A team of Estyn inspectors undertook a monitoring visit in March 2012, during which they judged that the authority should remain in the follow-up category of Estyn monitoring. A further monitoring visit took place from 15 - 17 January 2013, and this letter records the outcomes of that visit.

Alun Connick HMI led a team of three inspectors to review the progress made against the recommendations arising from the earlier inspection, to consider the overall direction of travel of the authority's performance and to identify any further areas for improvement.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive and senior officers. They scrutinised documentation including evidence on the progress made on each of the inspection recommendations. They also considered outcomes from all Estyn inspections in the authority undertaken since the original inspection in January 2011. The team also liaised with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to senior officers of the authority.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Since Estyn's previous monitoring visit to Wrexham CBC in March 2012, there have been a number of significant changes to the elected membership of the Council. Newly elected members show a good level of support to the chief executive in improving services and in helping to develop amongst staff a sharper focus on

outcomes and the impact of services. Members now provide a good momentum for service development and improvement.

The local authority has a useful action plan in which it sets out how it aims to meet the recommendations made in the inspection and monitoring visit. It has improved its monitoring of progress towards these objectives and has improved the rigour and accuracy of its evaluation.

At key stage 2, performance has improved since 2010 and is now above the average for Wales.

Last year the authority gave good support to some underperforming secondary schools which enabled them to improve the performance of a majority of learners in those schools. However performance across the authority at key stages 3 and 4 is below the average for Wales. Currently one-third of the authority’s schools are in the lowest 25%. The authority has improved engagement with the small number of challenging schools that were previously reluctant to work with them. The performance of these schools reflects this work by the authority. It is now engaged with nearly all schools, holding them to account and enabling it to support and challenge more effectively in order to improve performance at key stages 3 and 4.

Over the past three years Wrexham has met or exceeded nearly all the expected benchmarks set by the Welsh Government. These take free-school-meal (fsm) levels into account. Attendance in primary and secondary schools is good. Rates have improved since last year. Wrexham schools have a good track-record of not permanently excluding pupils.

Overall, the team judged that the local authority had made good progress towards addressing the recommendations in the inspection report. As a result of these findings, the authority will be removed from the follow-up category of Estyn monitoring. Your Estyn Link Inspector will continue to monitor overall progress through the normal link role with the authority.

Recommendations

The authority should maintain the good pace of progress that has been evident since the inspection in January 2011 in order to address all recommendations fully.

Progress on the recommendations in the report

Recommendation 1	Clarify the objectives for education within the council’s priorities and reflect these within its plans
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This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The local authority has consulted well with stakeholders to identify and agree its objectives and priorities. The authority’s Council Plan sets out these strategic

priorities and the outcomes it needs to achieve clearly. It has produced useful summaries that make the plan easy for all interested parties to understand.

The local authority has made good progress in aligning the operational plans of services with the council's joint and corporate plans. The new departmental planning process has improved the consistency of service plans, which now are informed effectively by and contribute to the authority's high level objectives. A useful overview document summarises all departmental priorities.

Education services have operational plans that take good account of the council's headline outcome indicators for education. Service managers understanding of outcome-based planning has improved, which has focused them on the impact of services when designing planning and improvement objectives. However, not all of the current service plans yet reflect this and a few lack a strong enough focus on evaluating outcomes. The authority recognises this and has a good understanding of what it needs to do to refine future plans. Senior managers report their confidence that the design of outcome-focused objectives in next year's operational plans will improve. This in turn will help the local authority to better monitor and evaluate service impact.

The progress made by each service towards meeting its priorities and objectives is monitored regularly and reported clearly to the Executive Board every quarter.

Recommendation 2	Make sure that the roles of executive board and scrutiny support effective decision-making to improve services to children and young people
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This recommendation has been fully addressed.

The local authority has introduced an effective induction programme and a core training programme for members. New members receive useful mentoring support which helps them play an active role within the council. Many have received training to help them fully understand the principles of outcome-focused planning.

In May 2012, the council accepted proposals to revise the new constitution for the council, which strengthened the procedures of the Executive Board and Scrutiny. It also incorporated a review of members' role descriptions, which gives an improved emphasis to lead members' responsibilities to lead on their portfolio areas. The result has been stronger participation in the decision making process and improvements in their accountability. The Leader of the Council has taken good account of members' interests, backgrounds and expertise when allocating responsibilities to lead members.

The lead member for education has a clear understanding of how well education services are performing. Since the local elections in May 2012, he has taken an

active role in presenting reports to Scrutiny and works well with local authority officers to help them plan and develop performance reports.

Scrutiny members carry out their role of providing challenge to education services well. Scrutiny Committee Chairs consider scrutiny reports carefully and generally receive enough data and information to enable them to direct their challenge appropriately. For example, the Chair of the Education, Safeguarding and Well-being Scrutiny Committee is now able to monitor and challenge managers rigorously on their progress towards meeting Estyn’s recommendations, which has resulted in improvement. Occasionally, the data they receive still does not focus enough on service outcomes.

Recommendation 3	Improve the quality and consistency of evaluation of services to better inform planning
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This recommendation has been largely addressed.

There are good arrangements to monitor the work of the heads of service by the corporate director and lead member for education. The annual performance appraisal system links effectively the individual performance of staff to their operational objectives. There is effective on-going training to help staff evaluate and challenge their own performance. There is a growing awareness by all staff in the lifelong learning department of how their role contributes towards the achievement of corporate objectives. This results in more managers and staff challenging each other in meetings as to what outcomes service improvements should achieve, which in turn improves the focus of their planning.

The 2012 self-evaluation report is outcome focussed and evaluative. It sets out clearly the progress the authority has made against the recommendations from the previous Estyn inspection. Progress against the post inspection action plan has been reported well to elected members, framework partners and other stakeholders.

Recommendation 4	Develop consistent arrangements for reporting performance in education services and across the Children and Young People’s Partnership
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This recommendation has been largely addressed.

There is a clear, shared overview of education performance across the authority. This is achieved through regular reporting to the council’s revised scrutiny committee and executive board. The authority has made good progress in improving the way in which it reports on performance against its joint plan. It continues to embed its approach to outcome-based reporting through outcome groups for the children and

young people (CYP) framework, which evaluate the performance of services. A Monitoring and Review Group meets quarterly and there is an effective process in place to receive reports from all chairs of the outcome groups. Most of the outcome groups produce completed report cards, which show whether the authority is moving towards achieving its planned objectives. However, the use of high level, annual indicators means that the authority cannot always measure and respond quickly enough when performance starts to decline within a year. The authority recognises this and has set up a new system of exception reporting where outcome groups report more frequently on actions that are giving cause for concern.

The authority has a useful data development agenda and is making good progress in identifying the additional data it needs to collect to refine its performance reporting.

Recommendation 5	Reduce surplus places in secondary schools in line with the council's realigned strategy for school reorganisation
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This recommendation has been largely addressed.

In the last year, the local authority has made good progress in developing innovative proposals to reduce surplus places. The authority currently has the second lowest percentage of surplus places in primary schools in Wales, although at secondary level the percentage of surplus places remains high and is the sixth highest in Wales. Since 2010 there has been a small reduction in the number of surplus places.

The authority has further improved its method for forecasting school places and now reviews the accuracy of its forecasts by comparing them to actual admissions. This allows them to refine their methodology relating to individual schools.

The Executive Board recently approved a feasibility study on the use of surplus places in secondary schools to accommodate a range of education support services. This will examine proposals to relocate services presently based at the Erlas centre, thus freeing up that building. The study will also explore considerations to provide accommodation for the use of the regional School Improvement Service. This work is proceeding well and is projected to lead to a reduction of around 360 surplus places by September 2014.

In addition, the authority's agreed 21st Century School proposal includes a project to establish a flexible learning zone in one of the town centre secondary schools. On completion in 2016 this project is planned to further reduce the surplus in the secondary sector by at least 200 places.

The authority has recently reviewed the remit of its Learning Partnership Board. The Board is working well to develop an alternative model for post-16 learning within the authority. The sub-group leading the work includes representatives of all the relevant providers. The work is focussed appropriately on issues concerned with quality and value for money that have been highlighted in previous Estyn reports. Members

considered the principles in an all-Member workshop in November 2012 and the final proposals will be presented to the Executive Board in March of this year.

Recommendation 6	Improve the effectiveness of arrangements to tackle secondary school budget deficits
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This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The authority has made significant progress in improving the effectiveness of its arrangements to tackle secondary school budget deficits. The authority's 'Challenge and Support Process for Schools with a Deficit Budget' guidance document was agreed with schools by September 2012 and is now operational. The document sets out an appropriate rationale and process for agreeing licensed deficits and explains clearly the procedures for monitoring how well schools adhere to agreed budget plans. It also outlines the levels of intervention the authority may employ when schools do not manage deficit situations as set out in the 'Licensed Deficit' agreement.

The guidance is already providing officers with useful support in their discussions with schools. It has started to impact on reducing the number of schools in deficit in the primary and secondary sector from ten in March 2011 to eight in March 2012. The authority has agreed plans in place with seven other secondary schools to deliver a balanced budget by 31 March 2013 and with the remaining two schools to achieve this by 31 March 2014.

The authority has robust systems in place to monitor these budgets and the most recent data suggests that the required outcomes will be achieved.

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

Yours sincerely



Clive Phillips
Assistant Director