

Mr Darren Mepham
Chief Executive
Bridgend County Borough Council
Civic Offices
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Dear Mr Mepham

Estyn monitoring visit, 2-5 December 2014

Following the outcome of the inspection of education services for children and young people in October 2012, the authority was identified as requiring Estyn monitoring as follow-up to this inspection.

The first monitoring visit took place from 17-19 March 2014 and the final visit from 2-5 December 2014. This letter records the outcomes of these visits.

Mr Tony Bate HMI led a team of three inspectors to review the progress made against all of the recommendations arising from the inspection.

The team held discussions with elected members, senior officers and a range of other staff. The team scrutinised documentation including evidence on the progress made against the recommendations since the inspection.

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Education, the Chair of Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny and the Corporate Director for Children.

Outcome of the monitoring visits

Since the inspection there has been significant changes in the senior management team within the children's directorate. The chief executive was new in post at the time of the inspection. The new corporate director for children joined the authority in May 2013 as a head of service. She became interim director in September 2013 when the previous director retired and was appointed to this post permanently in November 2013. The head of service for performance, strategy and commissioning within a revised directorate structure was appointed in March 2014.

During the period of senior management changes, progress in addressing the recommendations from the inspection was initially slow. However, the pace of change has increased under the leadership of the new director.

Bridgend County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of October 2012. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority is no longer in need of Estyn monitoring and is removing it from further follow-up activity.

Progress on the recommendations outlined in the inspection report in 2012

R1: Improve outcomes for learners, especially at key stages 2 and 3 by using individual pupil data to set more robust targets and by strengthening the rigour and consistency in the local authority's challenge to schools

Progress: This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) is 20.7% compared to the Wales average of 19.2%. This level of eligibility ranks the authority 15th in Wales out of the 22 local authorities in 2014 where the first is the authority with the lowest level of free school meals.

Since the inspection in October 2012, outcomes for learners have improved in all the main indicators in the Foundation Phase and in key stages 2, 3 and 4. For most indicators, the rate of improvement has been faster than the Wales average over the last two years. In 2014, performance on the Foundation Phase indicator and the main indicators at key stages 2, 3 and 4 that include English or Welsh first language and mathematics is all close to the Wales averages.

When compared to that of similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, performance of schools in Bridgend at key stage 2 in 2014 is a little above average in English, Welsh first language, mathematics and science. The majority of schools are in the middle two quarters when their performance in the core subject indicator (CSI) at key stage 2 is compared to that of similar schools.

At key stage 3 in 2014, performance in English, Welsh first language and science is above average when compared with that of similar schools. Although performance in mathematics is slightly below average, the authority has improved its performance relative to others since the inspection. Many schools are in the middle two quarters when their performance is compared to that of similar schools, although no school is in the top quarter for the CSI at key stage 3.

The Central South Consortium Joint Education Service (CSCJES) provides school improvement services on behalf of Bridgend, as well as four other local authorities in South Wales. Challenge advisers from CSCJES use a clear framework to guide their work with schools. This is bringing greater consistency to the way in which schools are evaluated and the nature and level of challenge, support and intervention that may follow. All the challenge advisers evaluate the quality of leadership and management in schools, and the accuracy of their evaluation has improved.

In addition to direct involvement with a challenge adviser, schools within the Central South Consortium are working more closely together to support each other through a range of approaches which the CSCJES and local authority are facilitating. These approaches are at an early stage of development and it is too soon to judge the impact of them on standards and provision across the local authority's schools.

Most headteachers, governors, CSCJES officers, local authority officers and elected members share a common understanding of their respective responsibilities. There is now a clearer understanding of who is accountable for performance within the local authority. Appropriate systems are in place to quality assure work and challenge underperformance. In particular, senior local authority officers work well with challenge advisers and CSCJES senior managers to ensure that important information about schools is shared and to monitor the progress of schools causing concern.

The authority is using its statutory powers more effectively to intervene in schools causing concern. It has, for example, issued several warning letters to schools outlining its concern about aspects of performance and set out areas for improvement, with a caution that it may issue a statutory warning notice should progress be insufficient. Its actions are more rigorous and timely than at the time of the inspection. However, the authority is not always specific enough about expected improvements and does not always follow up its concerns consistently.

All schools use individual pupil data to inform their targets and track pupil progress. Although the local authority's schools do not use a single common system for tracking pupil progress, challenge advisers have access to, and interrogate, individual pupil data to validate the appropriateness of targets in schools. The local authority now expects schools to set challenging but realistic targets that would, at the very least, place their performance above the median for similar schools based on free school meal benchmarks. Where schools have exceptional reasons for setting a lower target, these are carefully considered by the challenge adviser and local authority.

Overall, improvements in target setting and in the rigour and consistency of challenge to schools have contributed to better outcomes for learners.

R2: Improve attendance in primary and secondary schools by continuing to develop the joint work between education welfare and family engagement officers

Progress: This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the inspection, attendance has improved in secondary and primary schools.

Over this period, Bridgend's ranking position out of 22 local authorities in Wales improved from 16th to 7th for secondary school attendance. It improved by 1.9 percentage points from 91.9% in 2011 to 93.8% in 2014. This improvement is at a higher rate than the Wales average. In comparison with similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmark, seven out of the nine secondary schools are in the

upper 50% or better. Attendance rates in 2014 for secondary schools in Bridgend are now above the average for Wales for the first time in five years.

In primary schools, between 2012 and 2014 attendance has remained near to the average for Wales. Within this period, attendance has increased by 1.1 percentage points from 93.7% to 94.8%. This is similar to the average rate of improvement across the local authorities in Wales.

The local authority has successfully reduced the level of persistent absentees in both primary and secondary schools. In secondary schools, the percentage of pupils persistently absent is now below the Wales average having reduced from 29.5% in 2012 to 22.7% in 2014. In the primary sector, this has reduced from 12.3% in 2012 to 11.9% in 2013, but this is still above the Wales average. Unverified figures from the local authority suggest a continued reduction in primary schools in 2014.

The rate of fixed-term exclusions remains below the Wales average and the number of days lost per exclusion is still amongst the lowest in Wales. However, in 2013, the number of permanent exclusions had increased considerably to be amongst the highest in Wales, and unverified data from the local authority suggest that this number has remained relatively high in 2014. A multi-agency task group, including secondary headteachers, has been established to inform practice, although it is too early to assess the impact on reducing exclusions overall.

Joint work by education welfare and family engagement officers on improving attendance is showing evidence of progress. For example, the early intervention and prevention workshops conducted with pupils who have poor attendance and punctuality have resulted in the majority of these pupils improving their attendance. The education welfare service works effectively with a range of services to improve attendance. Multi-agency teams work from community hubs across the county borough. As a result, the authority has increased its capacity to conduct specific intervention strategies for pupils whose attendance falls below 90% in secondary schools. These are having positive results in improving attendance for the majority of these pupils.

Many schools have appropriately adopted a new systematic approach to managing attendance. The local authority provides schools with monthly attendance statistics and education welfare officers meet headteachers regularly to discuss attendance related issues. Education welfare officers and family engagement officers work well together and are routinely included in pastoral meetings at schools. The local authority makes good use of attendance data with challenge advisors and is beginning to evaluate the impact of the different activities that schools use to improve attendance.

The authority has provided schools with a clearer direction regarding the authorisation of term-time holidays. It has consulted with stakeholders regarding a code of conduct for a 'zero tolerance' approach to authorising holidays in term time and of issuing fixed penalty notices for poor attendance. It is too soon to see the impact of these initiatives on improving attendance.

R3: Strengthen self-evaluation in order to understand what is working well and what needs to improve in order to help learners achieve their goals

Progress: This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Overall, the directorate has good systems to capture, monitor and report performance data across its education services and track the extent to which plans are being delivered. However, the local authority's self evaluation does not fully evaluate impact in all areas, for example in inclusion services, the local authority evaluation of looked after children, gypsy and traveller children and children with SEN is limited.

The local authority has continued to strengthen its corporate performance assessment process, which monitors the performance of every directorate. This process provides helpful quarterly updates for all senior managers on progress relating to directorate commitments and performance indicators. This includes year on year trend data, but does not take enough account of comparisons with other authorities to benchmark Bridgend's performance.

At quarterly meetings, senior managers scrutinise directorate reports, challenge the performance of each other's directorates and agree actions to improve performance where necessary. The children's directorate has engaged positively in this process. A more open approach to evaluating underperformance in these meetings has resulted in swifter action within the directorate to address issues, for example the completion of staff appraisals and compliance in meeting deadlines in the development of statements of special educational needs. The approach is also leading to better joint working across directorates to tackle areas for improvement and to work more efficiently.

A school improvement monitoring group, chaired by the leader of the council, is monitoring the local authority's post-inspection action plan closely. The director provides useful monthly reports for this group that record key issues relating to the recommendations and the actions taken. The group's minutes clearly record progress against actions but do not always record an evaluation of impact well enough.

For the wider services and projects within the directorate, effective systems are used to capture, monitor and report on performance, for example through the use of databases, 'Outcomes Based Accountability' scorecards and a template for service area updates. The quality assurance of these processes is improving to ensure the validity and value of information collected. The authority is working to integrate different systems across the directorate to improve its ability to measure the overall impact of its work on individual children and young people. Through these systems, the directorate has good evidence to support self-evaluation. However, the authority does not consistently use this evidence well enough to inform higher-level evaluation of the impact of provision.

A new corporate performance management framework was introduced in December 2013. The framework is clear and defines accountabilities for performance management, as well as setting out the necessary processes and procedures from corporate level down to individual level. This has contributed to improvements in many of the authority's performance indicators relating to education services.

R4: Improve the quality of information provided to elected members so that they can challenge the performance of the authority's services and schools more robustly

Progress: This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the inspection, the local authority has held two courses on understanding data aimed at improving elected members' skills. The first course focused on how data is used to show and evaluate local authority performance, and the second course focused on how to interpret school level data. The local authority has worked effectively in partnership with the regional consortium to provide this training, and has appropriately used live schools data. However, only 36% of the members of the children and young people scrutiny committee, and only 22% of all elected members, have attended both courses. In spite of the low attendance, minutes of recent scrutiny meetings show that members are beginning to ask more rigorous questions when challenging officers and school leaders on performance.

The quality of education services information available to elected members is improving, especially through the developing use of the 'Info Zone' online system to share information. Detailed information in committee reports to support recommendations for action generally informs elected members well. Officers' reports on school performance have improved and the important messages are conveyed clearly.

The role of cabinet in monitoring individual school's performance is clearer. Cabinet members monitor Estyn's inspection reports on the local authority's schools. When Estyn places a school in a follow-up category, officers provide a report to cabinet to explain the judgments, and later provide a report on the quality of the school's post inspection action plan.

Scrutiny also includes in its work programme reviews of school performance following Estyn's inspections. This group has looked at four schools to date. Headteachers and governing bodies from high performing and low performing schools are called into scrutiny's School Engagement Panel. At these meetings, they explain their approaches, the issues and challenges that have impacted on their performance. As well as considering issues arising from Estyn inspections, the panel now uses its own intelligence to focus on schools where there are issues or concerns, or where there has been important developments and significant improvement in performance. This aspect of scrutiny's work is at an early stage of development.

R5: Continue to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)

Progress: This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the inspection, initial progress had been slow in addressing the percentage of pupils leaving full-time education at the end of Year 11 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). In 2012, this percentage rose, ranking the authority amongst the worst performing in Wales. However, by 2013, the authority and its partners have made good progress in reducing this percentage to be in line with the Wales average. The authority is now ranked 13th in Wales out of the 22 local

authorities, were the first is the authority with the lowest percentage of NEETs. Unverified data for 2014, provided by the authority, suggests a further reduction in the number of young people who are NEETs.

In 2012, Estyn judged that the proportion of young people leaving school whose destination was not known was too high. Since then, the authority has worked well with its partners, and in 2013, the proportion of young people leaving school in both Year 11 and Year 13 whose destination was not known has significantly reduced to be below the Wales average. In 2011, there were 49 young people in Year 11 whose destinations were unknown. In 2013, this reduced to nine young people. Over the same period, the number of pupils in Year 13 whose destinations were unknown has reduced from 79 young people to 17.

The authority is beginning to implement the key components of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF). An engagement and progression co-ordinator collates information from various sources, within the authority and other partners, to aid in the early identification of potential NEETs and those most at risk of disengagement. The authority uses its early identification system to allocate a lead worker to support these young people and ensure that suitable interventions are put in place to meet their needs. Schools engage well with this process.

The local authority is working effectively with its partners (such as Careers Wales and Job Centre Plus) to ensure that there is a comprehensive range of suitable interventions and progression routes for these young people.

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 to the Wales Audit Office for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Wales Audit Office