



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

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A report on

**Flintshire County Council
County Hall
Mold
Flintshire
CH7 6NB**

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by

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

About Flintshire County Council

Flintshire County Council is located in North Wales and has a total population of 155,155. The local authority maintains 78 schools. There are 64 primary schools, including five that provide Welsh-medium education. There are 11 secondary schools including one Welsh-medium school. In addition, there are two special schools and a portfolio pupil referral unit.

The Chief Executive took up his post in 2007 and the Chief Officer for Education and Youth, who fulfils the role of Statutory Director for Education, was appointed in June 2018. The Leader of the Council has been in his role since April 2019 and retains the cabinet lead role for education services, which he has held since May 2017. The local authority's last inspection was in October 2011.

Flintshire is one of six local authorities in the GwE Consortium region, which provides the school improvement services for the local authority.

In 2018-2019, the Council's net education budget was approximately £102 million. The delegated school budget per pupil is £4,671 per pupil, which is ninth lowest of all local authorities in Wales. The average per pupil schools budget in Wales is £4,776 per pupil.

Inspectors take account of a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating outcomes and the quality of education services. They consider this information alongside information about the national population. Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Flintshire is noted below:

- Over a three year average, 14.6 % of pupils aged five to fifteen are eligible for free school meals, which is lower than the Wales average of 17.9%
- 5.1 % of pupils aged five and over are fluent in Welsh, which is lower than the Wales average of 16.2%
- 7.3 % of pupils are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 11.0%
- 20.0 % of pupils have special educational needs, lower than the Wales average of 22.6%
- 68 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2018, which is lower than the Wales average of 102 children per 10,000

Summary

Overall pupils in Flintshire make sound progress during their time in schools. In 2018, standards in the main indicators across the local authority were comparable with those in other similar local authorities.

Pupils' attendance in primary and secondary schools does not compare well with that for similar local authorities. Fixed-term and permanent exclusions for pupils in secondary schools are higher than the Wales average.

The assessment of pupils who may require education other than at school (EOTAS) is good, with appropriate provision available to them. This provision is available for pupils from foundation phase to key stage 4.

Provision for pupils with special education needs is good, and the support available from the speech and language service is particularly effective.

The local authority's arrangements for identifying schools and non-maintained settings causing concern work well, and in most cases lead to effective actions. The working relationships between the local authority and its regional consortium are good and effective. The support provided by the regional school improvement service, GwE, has helped most schools to improve their outcomes at key stage 4 in 2018. Despite these improvements, around a half of secondary schools still did not perform as well as expected in many indicators.

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for education in Flintshire, which they express clearly in the local authority's strategic planning. The authority works well in partnership across services areas, with schools, and with external providers. This contributes well to improving support for vulnerable learners in particular.

The authority's ongoing performance management processes are effective, and provide good and up-to-date information regarding progress against its strategic plans and an accurate evaluation of headline performance indicators. However, the local authority does not monitor or evaluate the work of a few of its front line education services well enough to understand their impact on outcomes for learners.

The local authority's allocation of resources to its education services and schools reflects the high priority given to education in the corporate plan. However, the local authority has allowed a small number of schools to carry a financial deficit balance for too long.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve outcomes for learners in key stage 4
- R2 Reduce exclusions and increase attendance in both primary and secondary schools
- R3 Improve the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the few front line education services identified in the report in order to provide more accurate information about the impact of the local authority's work
- R4 Manage the reduction in school budget deficits more effectively

What happens next

Following the publication of the inspection report, the local authority should update its plans to address the recommendations and to take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority should update its plans within three months of the publication of the inspection report.

We have requested that the local authority prepare an effective practice case study on its work in relation to early intervention within the speech, language and communication service and its impact on foundation phase learners. We will publish the case study on our web site.

Main findings

Outcomes

Overall, pupils in Flintshire make sound progress during their time in statutory education. Generally, standards in primary schools are stronger than those in secondary schools.

Over the last three years, Estyn has inspected 24 primary schools in Flintshire, and has judged many of these as 'good' for standards. This is similar to the Wales average, whilst the proportion of primary schools judged as excellent for standards is well above the Wales average. During this time, Estyn has not placed any primary school in a statutory category following an inspection. However, pupils' use and development of Welsh and ICT skills are often noted as areas for improvement in primary school inspection reports.

Estyn has inspected four of the eleven secondary schools over the last three years. Overall standards were judged to be good in one school, adequate in two schools and unsatisfactory in the other school. Standards at the end of key stage 4 in secondary schools, based on formal qualifications, over the last three years have fluctuated. In 2018, standards are comparable with those in similar local authorities, including performance in indicators that include English or Welsh and mathematics.

Pupils who are eligible for free school meals generally perform broadly in line with the same group of pupils across Wales. The performance of pupils with special educational needs is similar to that of their counterparts nationally, and standards in the maintained special secondary school are good. The performance of other vulnerable groups of pupils has improved over the last three years. In particular the percentage of looked after children that gain a recognised qualification has increased.

Over the last three years, the proportion of Year 11 leavers known not to be in education, employment or training has remained low and at the end of 2017 is in line with the Wales average.

Outcomes from Estyn inspection reports in all school sectors show that most pupils' wellbeing is good. Pupils who need support to improve their mental and emotional health benefit from the valuable strategies that the local authority implements. These include effective support for identified pupils from school-based counsellors. The authority's analysis shows that pupils who have taken part in counselling sessions during the past three years have improved their emotional wellbeing.

Young people also have good opportunities to develop their self-esteem and social skills through the work of the Integrated Youth Provision. For example, a group of young people have taken part in a training programme to develop their leadership skills working in partnership with Glyndwr University. Following the training, these young leaders work in youth centres and at residential camps providing support for other young people. A few young leaders use their new skills to work with their local community councils to represent the young people in their local areas.

The attendance of pupils in both primary and secondary schools does not compare well with levels in similar local authorities. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals is weaker in Flintshire schools than that of similar pupils across Wales. In both primary and secondary schools, the percentage of pupils who are persistently absent has been above the Wales average for the last three years.

The number of permanent exclusions has increased over the last three years and is higher than the Wales average. The number of fixed-term exclusions in primary schools has reduced. However, in secondary schools, there is an increasing trend in the number of fixed-term exclusions of five days or less over the past three years. The number of fixed-term exclusions of five days or more has increased over the past three years but has reduced since the last inspection.

Young people have valuable opportunities to contribute to decisions about issues that affect them and the local authority takes good account of their views. Members of secondary school councils have been involved well in the local authority's work on the School Health Research Network. Pupils analysed the information collected from surveys about pupils' health and wellbeing to identify the concerns in their schools and produce school action plans to address these. Following this work, groups of school council members from each secondary school worked together with local authority officers to identify common issues in schools across the authority. Research officers from Cardiff University trained these pupils to help them to understand and interpret the data from the surveys effectively. This purposeful work has resulted in the development of a comprehensive local authority action plan to improve the health and wellbeing of young people in Flintshire.

Education services

Under Inspection Area 2, Estyn sets local inspection questions that are relevant to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's current strategic priorities or result from information that Estyn has about education services in the local authority.

How well does the local authority work with schools to improve attainment across key stage 4?

The local authority and the regional consortium (GwE) work well together to support those schools which need to improve the outcomes pupils achieve by the end of key stage 4. There is a strong working relationship between the authority's education officers, the consortium's supporting improvement advisers (SIAs) and the secondary schools, focused on improvement. This relationship is based on mutual respect, trust and understanding.

The authority, through this collaborative working, identifies clearly the needs of secondary schools. This partnership provides bespoke support that includes, in many cases, actions designed to address shortcomings in key stage 4. Subject supporting improvement advisers (SSIAs) provide helpful support for core subjects and work well with heads of department and teachers to develop their understanding of what is required to improve standards. This includes good access to professional learning opportunities and leadership training. SSIAs provide strong support for the analysis of data in individual schools, which enables teachers to know pupils' strengths and areas where they need to improve.

Senior local authority officers monitor the performance of secondary schools closely and scrutinise performance data thoroughly. They have identified specific areas for improvement accurately in key stage 4, including increasing the proportion of pupils that gain five or more grades A*-A or equivalent. Through regular meetings with core leads from the regional consortium, they consider progress in the schools carefully, enabling them to adapt plans and provide support where required in a timely manner.

Overall, school improvement services have helped to improve outcomes in most schools at key stage 4, although around a half of secondary schools still do not perform as well as expected in many indicators.

How well does the local authority ensure appropriate support for schools and settings causing concern?

Officers and elected members in Flintshire know their schools and settings well and can outline clearly the relative strengths and areas for improvement. They recognise specific issues facing individual schools causing concern and act in a timely way to put in place the most appropriate support in collaboration with GwE. Where appropriate, local authority officers raise matters of concern with their counterparts in GwE, and these issues are resolved quickly, generally resulting in more effective support.

Local authority officers and supporting improvement advisers (SIAs) from GwE collaborate to identify specific priorities for schools causing concern using a range of evidence and plan programmes of support. For example, together with subject supporting improvement advisers (SSIAs), SIAs provide helpful guidance and signpost schools and leaders to beneficial professional learning opportunities for teaching and leadership. They provide feedback regarding progress against these priorities regularly to the local authority. As a result, there have been improvements in the performance of the few primary schools and in the small number of secondary schools, identified as causing concern. This work has also resulted in a positive improvement in standards, for example in those indicators that include mathematics. Since 2017, no non-maintained setting has been identified as causing concern.

In parallel to the support of GwE, the local authority works with individual schools causing concern on other important aspects such as improving attendance and behaviour, and reducing deficit budgets. Both in schools causing concern and in schools generally, progress in these particular aspects has been more limited. Further, the precise nature of the support provided and how this work is monitored and evaluated is not always clear enough.

The local authority regularly considers the progress of schools causing concern at a suitable range of management boards. These enable useful exchanges of evidence regarding the full range of issues facing these schools and settings. As a result, at a strategic level elected members and officers are able to consider overarching improvements in the round and to make informed decisions regarding progress in these schools. The local authority has used its powers effectively in the very few schools where progress has been too slow.

Many schools causing concern have responded well to the support put in place and have made sound progress. However, in a minority of secondary schools the changes have not led to sustained improvements over time.

How effective is the local authority's work to improve school attendance and reduce exclusions?

The local authority has developed helpful guidance for schools, which supports their work to improve attendance and reduce exclusions. The guidance is helping schools to understand their responsibilities as key partners for improving attendance and when and how the local authority will intervene.

The education welfare officers (EWOs) engage effectively with many secondary schools and their partner primary schools to support them with any attendance and transition issues. This also allows officers to get to know and understand the families that need support well. They also helpfully signpost parents to further beneficial support from other organisations.

In cases of very poor attenders, the Education Welfare Service (EWS) arranges strategy meetings with parents, school staff and other relevant professionals to develop agreed ways to improve the attendance of targeted individuals. These actions are successful in making incremental improvements in the attendance of some of these pupils, although the overall rate of persistent absence in primary and secondary schools has not reduced over the last three years.

The EWS works well in partnership with other agencies, both supporting their work, and involving these agencies in activities to support attendance. For example, the EWS contributes well to the work of the Early Help Hub and team around the school to support pupils. Also, staff from the Integrated Youth Service contribute purposefully in engaging individual learners at risk of disengaging with education.

The EWS uses a broad range of strategies to support improvements in attendance and, where appropriate, the local authority uses its powers to issue fixed penalty notices and prosecutions to improve the attendance of individual pupils. As a result of its broad range of strategies, the EWS has successfully supported schools to maintain low levels of unauthorised absence.

Data sharing is not carried out effectively enough within the service and, as a result, individual officers and the EWS do not have a complete understanding of the challenges they face. Although EWOs can give examples of the impact of their intervention on the attendance rate of individual pupils, evaluation of work to support attendance is not strong enough. Officers do not have sufficient understanding of the impact of their services and why overall school attendance has not improved in recent years.

The authority has identified for itself the need to reduce the rate of fixedterm and permanent exclusions in the Education and Youth Portfolio Business Plan 2019-2020. The authority has in place clear protocols and procedures to manage fixedterm and permanent exclusion. For example, there is a managed moves protocol in place, which is agreed and understood well by headteachers. Since April 2019, the authority has changed its approach so that funding transfers to the new

school with pupils involved in a managed move, addressing a local barrier to the successful implementation of managed moves.

The authority's portfolio pupil referral unit (PPRU) and the behaviour support team provide targeted support for schools and their staff for dealing with pupils' behaviour issues, through advice, outreach and training. The secondary intervention programme, a 12 week programme that works with individual learners to build their resilience and confidence, helps pupils to develop strategies to manage their own behaviour when they return to school. The PPRU maintains links with these pupils after they return to school.

How well do the local authority's services ensure suitable support for pupils Educated Other Than At School (EOTAS)?

The senior manager for inclusion and progression has a detailed working knowledge of the EOTAS service and a clear vision for developing this provision for vulnerable learners. Leaders have a shared vision for a supportive inclusive education provision where all pupils are equally valued. Staff within the authority and its schools understand well their responsibilities for this and demonstrate a strong commitment to the pupils with whom they work.

Self evaluation processes within EOTAS are robust and highlight well the strengths and appropriate areas for improvement. For example, senior managers highlighted the need to appoint an additional member of staff to address a strategic leadership need within the inclusion team.

The EOTAS panel meets regularly to identify learners who may benefit from specialist support, to monitor their progress, and to oversee the provision. EOTAS managers monitor closely that pupils receiving home tuition and pupils educated in specialist placements outside the local authority receive appropriate provision.

EOTAS service managers and officers collaborate well with a wide range of partners, such as Coleg Cambria, to ensure an effective range of alternative provision for learners educated other than at school, in order to ensure that they remain engaged. Staff working for these partners adapt courses effectively to maintain learners' engagement. They provide a valuable range of full and parttime provision to ensure that learners complete their courses.

The local authority has strong links with local further education colleges and other providers.

The PPRU provides an effective range of support for pupils with a range of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties from foundation phase to key stage 4. The EOTAS provision is flexible enough to support Welsh speaking pupils who access the range of services. Developments within the PPRU, such as the foundation phase provision at Canolfan yr Enfys, have expanded the local authority's offer, and increased its capacity to assess pupils and identify the best possible provision for the individual child at an early stage. Officers plan appropriate opportunities for pupils to access the provision on a fulltime, parttime or temporary basis according to their needs and for assessment purposes.

The local authority has a clear vision for the development of the PPRU, including future capital investment. The PPRU is a flexible resource that engages with schools to provide outreach training and support. For example, leaders and staff provide valuable support programmes for pupils with behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools. There are robust procedures in place to ensure that staff monitor these pupils' progress closely.

Local authority staff liaise closely with schools and EOTAS providers to ensure that pupils return to school when appropriate. Staff at all levels within the authority work successfully to ensure that learners remain engaged in their learning. The impact of this work is reflected in the low numbers of these pupils who at 16 go on to become NEET (not in education, employment or training).

Local authority staff provide useful resources to help parents to support their children with their learning where they receive EOTAS provision.

How effective is the local authority's work in identifying, providing and monitoring statutory support for pupils with special educational needs?

The local authority is committed to delivering good quality provision for pupils with special education needs. There is a clear link between the service delivery and the local authority's priority to improve 'the engagement, wellbeing and performance of vulnerable groups'. The special educational needs service is well resourced and its staff have significant expertise and experience. There is a strong sense of team working within the service and a valuable ethos of child-centred planning and provision.

The authority meets its statutory duties well. It is successful in completing statutory assessment within required timescales. A notable feature is that the authority provides extra financial resource to schools to support individual pupils whilst assessment and evidence gathering are taking place. Provision of assessment and support through the medium of Welsh is generally appropriate. Leaders ensure that parents are well informed about its services through the Parent Partnership service that is available to all parents of pupils with special educational needs. The local authority also provides comprehensive information about its support services through its website, and only a very few appeals have been made to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal Wales over time. Many pupils with special educational needs make good progress at school and move on to suitable further education, training or work.

The clear and comprehensive 'Additional Learning Needs Policy' includes helpful guidance to schools regarding the requirements of a graduated response to identifying pupil need and securing support. Moderation processes are consistent, well managed and transparent.

Service managers scrutinise outcomes of annual reviews carefully and make suitable amendments to provision. Senior leaders evaluate progress of pupils with special educational needs at the end of the foundation phase and other key stages. However, leaders' use of data and first-hand evidence to evaluate performance of the service is at an early stage of development.

There is a broad and comprehensive range of training for schools and early years settings to help them support individual pupils' needs. This includes enabling many teachers and learning support assistants to gain beneficial qualifications in delivering emotional literacy programmes and social communication interventions, and responding to attachment issues. Leaders consider emerging trends of difficulties for pupils across the authority well to provide relevant and timely training and support to school staff.

A notable feature in the local authority's work is its strong early intervention work in supporting children's speech, language and communication. For example, the Language Development Project enables well-resourced and effective universal, targeted and specialist support for younger pupils. The authority's language development assistants attend schools and work collaboratively with teachers to support individuals or small groups of pupils for fixed periods. In addition, the English as an additional language (EAL) service and the Language and Communication (CLASS) service deliver comprehensive and valuable training to teachers about early language acquisition for all pupils who have language difficulties. Initiatives such as these ensure early support for pupils and, in some cases, prevent the need for statutory assessment.

The local authority takes a lead role in several cross-authority projects. For example, managers chair regional ALN Transformation Groups and the effective Flintshire Sensory Service is now commissioned by two neighbouring authorities.

Leadership and management

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for ensuring effective education provision in Flintshire. They communicate this vision well across the authority, throughout the department, and to stakeholders and partners. The leadership of the education service by the chief officer for education and youth is inclusive and increasingly effective.

The authority's corporate plan demonstrates well the commitment to improving education, with one of its six core priorities being a 'learning council' with 'high performing education'. This priority is reflected well and further developed in the Education and Youth Portfolio's business plan. The business plan is generally clear, and sets out well the rationale for its priorities and actions for education services including non-formal education provision.

The corporate business planning and performance monitoring cycle is used well for ongoing strategic level monitoring of performance through the use of quarterly, half-yearly and annual reports. These reports provide good opportunities to identify the impact of the business plan's objectives, progress against actions, or slippage, and emerging risks. However, the authority's evaluation of a few front line services is not as rigorous, and therefore senior leaders are unclear about the full impact of these services. Also, it is not always clear how front line services plan to contribute to the progress of strategic objectives.

The local authority's annual self-evaluation processes are informed well through the intelligence generated by the business planning reports, and by consultation with a wide range of partners including its schools. As a consequence, the local authority's self-evaluation processes provide a generally accurate and ongoing understanding of the portfolio's performance.

Managers and senior leaders use the corporate performance management framework for staff effectively. The annual appraisal process is purposeful and identifies professional learning needs and individual strengths of staff well. Individual staff objectives link clearly to corporate and portfolio plans.

Officers show a strong commitment to their own professional learning, updating their knowledge and skills regularly. They do this within their own areas of responsibility through a range of well-considered activities. This ensures that staff have the skills to undertake their professional roles.

Services within the authority work well together to deliver their education duties, through the effective use of formal programme and project management procedures. The authority has a good working relationship with external partners, such as the local further education college, the local voluntary sector organisations and GwE. Officers also engage well with a wide range of regional and national networks, enabling them to exchange information and intelligence effectively and learn from colleagues working in other local authorities.

The authority's relationship with the primary and secondary headteacher federations is well established. The chief executive, chief education officer, other senior officers and the cabinet member for education and youth meet the headteacher federations regularly. This enables the authority to share its plans with headteachers and, as a consequence, headteachers' views contribute directly to planning and schools are integral to the decision-making process.

The authority has a strong working relationship with the regional consortium, and contributes well to its management, governance and scrutiny. The local authority and GwE share information frequently for operational purposes. This creates a shared understanding of school performance and ensures that the provision of bespoke packages of support is appropriate.

In most cases, reports to cabinet and scrutiny are well set out and contain useful information to help elected members understand the key issues under review. However, in a few cases, performance information and the key implications arising from this are not analysed clearly enough to help elected members focus on the most important areas for improvement.

The authority's scrutiny arrangements were recently reviewed by the Wales Audit Office. They concluded that scrutiny is well run but needed to adapt to meet future challenges. The Education and Youth Overview and Scrutiny Committee approaches its work in a variety of ways, generally through the traditional committee meeting, but also through closed workshops, occasional task and finish groups, and scrutiny committee members' attendance at school performance review meetings with specific schools. The Scrutiny work programme is proactive and covers a wide range of appropriate issues.

The local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) sets out well its commitment to promote the Welsh language and to increase the numbers of pupils receiving Welsh-medium education across all sectors. The strategy has responded to an identified need to expand Welsh-medium provision in the Mold, Flint and Buckley areas. The Welsh Advisory Team and the Early Years Team provide effective bespoke support to develop pupils' Welsh language skills from a very early age.

Flintshire local authority discharges its duties for safeguarding in education well. Child protection and safeguarding are a high priority within the authority. The local authority provides relevant training and support to education providers, which helps all staff to know and understand their safeguarding responsibilities, including those for preventing radicalisation. Safe recruitment procedures are well managed by the human resources team and there are consistent and stringent procedures in place for dealing with any allegations against staff.

The cross-service Safeguarding Group is beginning to influence positively the work of the Flintshire pioneer schools who are developing the health and wellbeing aspect of the new curriculum. For example, they have provided schools with useful resources to support them in identifying radicalisation, potential child sexual exploitation and unhealthy relationships. In addition, they have provided helpful materials to support National Safeguarding Week, such as model lessons on county lines.

The authority plans its annual budgets carefully and in accordance with its priorities. The Education and Youth portfolio has made significant budget savings in recent years, but the authority has prioritised protecting delegated school budgets. The funding delegated to schools has increased relative to other authorities and is now only slightly below average.

Officers and elected members monitor spending levels in detail every month. There is effective control of nearly all non-delegated budgets for which the education service is responsible, but the significant and recurring pressure on the demand-led out-of-county placement budget is a significant financial risk.

Officers have an appropriately detailed understanding of why some learners are placed in educational provision outside the county and how much that provision costs. Planning to consider potentially more cost-effective local provision for certain categories of learners is at an early stage. The Early Help Hub is a good example of effective joint working between different council services and other partners in a bid to prevent the needs of learners and their families from escalating, but it is too early to evaluate the Hub's effectiveness in supporting families and therefore reducing and avoiding future cost.

Senior council officers provide effective support to the School Budget Forum, which meets regularly. The Forum makes a valuable contribution in developing and adjusting the formula used to delegate funding to schools and in improving the quality of the agreements that govern the sale of services by the authority to its schools. Despite formula adjustments, however, a majority of secondary schools carried forward deficits into the 2019-20 financial year. The authority requires those schools planning to set deficit budgets to produce an agreed recovery plan, and to obtain the approval of senior officers before they appoint staff. However, the financial position in a small number of schools has continued to deteriorate year-on-year for longer than the maximum five-year period specified in the authority's scheme for financing schools.

The council makes good use of a range of sources of capital funding to improve both the quality and efficiency of its school estate. The decision-making process surrounding school reorganisation is thorough and comprehensive, and subsequent project management is rigorous in ensuring that projects are delivered on time and to

budget. Through a well-considered combination of school closure, new build and remodelling, the maintenance backlog has fallen significantly in recent years. Almost 90% of schools are deemed to be in at least satisfactory condition. School reorganisation has also reduced surplus capacity in schools, although the proportion of surplus places remains above the national target. The Welsh Government has approved the authority's ambitious £85 million proposals for the second phase of the 21st Century Schools programme which, subject to affordability, has the potential to sustain the progress made during the first phase.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

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:

Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court, Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

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