



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



## **A report on education services in**

**Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council  
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Castle Street  
Merthyr Tydfil  
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**by**

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

**This report is also available in Welsh.**

## About Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council has a total population of around 60,000. The local authority maintains 26 mainstream schools. There are 22 primary schools, including two that provide Welsh-medium education. There are four secondary schools, neither of which are Welsh-medium schools. In 2021, 448 pupils attend Welsh-medium secondary schools outside the local authority. In addition, there is one special school and one pupil referral unit. Merthyr Tydfil is one of five local authorities in the Central South Consortium for school improvement.

The chief executive took up his post in June 2021. The director of education was first seconded from Rhondda Cynon Taf to the role of chief officer for learning in October 2017 and this position was made permanent in April 2019. The chief officer role has recently changed to director of education. The council leader has been in her role since January 2021. The leader is also the portfolio holder for education services, having held this role since 2017.

In 2021-2022, the local authority's budgeted revenue expenditure is around £62 million. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2021-2022 is £4,759, which is close to the average in Wales.

The local authority's last inspection was in 2012. The local authority required special measures, and was removed from this category of follow-up after a monitoring visit in 2016.

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 Merthyr Tydfil is noted below:

- Over a three year average, 22% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, higher than the Wales average of 20.4%.
- 7% of pupils aged five and over are fluent in Welsh, which is considerably lower than the Wales average of 16%.
- 9% of pupils aged five or over are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 12%.
- 21% of pupils have special educational needs, higher than the Wales average of 20%.
- 150 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2021, which is the second highest rate in Wales.

## Summary

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for education in Merthyr Tydfil, and this is articulated well in the corporate plan and the education directorate's five-year 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy. The local authority has increased and protected its education budget at a time of budget pressures across the authority and, for 2021-2022, increased its education budget above the Wales average.

In 2019, the local authority recognised that education services needed strengthening and have since benefited from the support of a Welsh Government Improvement and Assurance Board, which was initially set up at the request of the authority to support corporate leadership and governance. The director of education has forged good working relationships with school leaders and improvement partners from the regional school improvement consortium, Central South Consortium (CSC). This cultural change laid the foundation for a collaborative approach to improving education services. Two new heads of service were appointed to the education directorate in 2021, and the chief officer for learning, together with other chief officers, has recently been upgraded to a director role in line with the local authority's strategic vision. It is too soon to evaluate fully the impact on learners of this cultural change and increased capacity of education services.

Overall, senior leaders in the local authority have a realistic view of the quality of its education services and recognise areas where services need to improve, including most of those highlighted in this inspection report. However, there is inconsistency in the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning work with education services and teams. The quality of scrutiny of education services has been weak for many years.

In the three years before to the COVID-19 pandemic, we inspected ten primary schools and two secondary schools. We judged that standards were excellent in two schools, good in six schools and adequate in four schools. These findings are broadly similar to national findings during the same period. One primary school and one secondary school were placed in the follow-up category of Estyn review. Both these schools improved and have been removed from follow-up.

Standards at the end of key stage 4 for pupils that are eligible to free-school meals in the three years before the pandemic were broadly in line with national averages. However, overall standards at the end of key stage 4 in the three years before the pandemic were low. During the same period, attendance at primary and secondary schools was the lowest in Wales and levels of persistent absence were notably high in secondary schools.

CSC has deployed a more effective and consistent team of improvement partners to Merthyr Tydfil's schools in recent years. Alongside better working relationships, this has led to schools engaging more effectively in improvement work, which has become more tailored to suit schools' individual needs. The local authority works well with CSC to identify schools causing concern and usually provides timely and helpful support for these schools to improve.

The local authority works well with a wide range of partners to reduce the impact of poverty and disadvantage on pupils' learning. The strength of partnership working enabled the local authority to deliver an engaging and successful 'Summer of Fun' programme of activities in 2021, which supported learners from disadvantaged backgrounds especially. Partnership work between the local authority, early years providers, primary schools and other partners is particularly strong in supporting children's early development of skills.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, education leaders supported schools purposefully, providing strong support for vulnerable pupils and those that found it difficult to engage with learning through the period when learning was provided remotely. The local authority's work during the pandemic has strengthened relationships with the community and provided officers in the education service with a better understanding of the challenges facing learners and their families. This is helping to ensure the provision of appropriate support and intervention for young people in the county.

The safeguarding of all children and young people is a high corporate priority and seen as everybody's responsibility. Officers, in particular the lead safeguarding manager for education, provide schools with a high level of support and guidance.

Across services, local authority officers have a comprehensive overview of the needs of vulnerable learners and their families. The local authority has suitable arrangements in place with schools to co-ordinate the work of different services to support vulnerable learners well.

The local authority makes a range of provision for pupils with social, emotional, and behavioural needs. The support services provided by the local authority to support the needs of these pupils are well regarded by schools. However, there is a high number of pupils who do not receive full-time education for extended periods of time. The local authority does not monitor closely enough the use of reduced timetables and their impact on pupils' progress. The local authority is unable to provide full assurance that the extended use of reduced timetables is appropriate for the pupils concerned.

The local authority highly values the contribution of both targeted and open access youth work provision to its young people. The authority consistently spends more than most local authorities on youth work services per head of the population. Youth workers support young people's education, health and wellbeing, and this support is often high quality. In formal education settings, youth workers deliver programmes that enable targeted pupils to attain qualifications and support most of them to progress successfully to the next stage of education or employment. Open access youth work is of a very good standard. The local authority highly values the voice of young people and provides them with significant opportunities to influence decisions that affect them, at service and strategic levels.

## **Recommendations**

- R1 Strengthen processes to monitor and evaluate progress against actions in education plans
- R2 Improve the quality of scrutiny of education services
- R3 Strengthen the oversight of the impact of provision on wellbeing and standards for learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and ensure that these learners are not disadvantaged by the extended use of part-time education provision
- R4 Ensure that provision for Welsh-medium secondary education meets the future needs of the pupils of Merthyr Tydfil

## **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 will invite the provider to prepare a case study on its work in relation to youth work services, for dissemination on our website.

## Main findings

### Outcomes

We are unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes. This is due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the suspension of inspections of schools and most other education providers since March 2020. It is also due to the lack of data about outcomes that can be compared over time as the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded and affected most other data that we consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations.

Any evaluations that follow provide a context by reporting on outcomes before the pandemic or relate to more recent outcomes where the evidence base is valid and reliable.

Between September 2017 and March 2020 we inspected ten primary schools and two secondary schools. We judged that standards were excellent in two schools, good in six schools and adequate in four schools. These findings are broadly similar to national findings during the same period. None of the 12 schools inspected was placed in a statutory follow up category. One primary school and one secondary school were placed in the follow-up category of Estyn review. Both of these schools improved and have been removed from follow-up.

Standards at the end of key stage 4 for pupils that are eligible to free-school meals in the three years before the pandemic were broadly in line with national averages. However, overall standards at the end of key stage 4 in the three years before the pandemic were low.

In the school inspections between 2017 and 2019, most schools received a judgement of good or excellent for wellbeing and attitudes to learning and no school in Merthyr Tydfil was judged to be unsatisfactory. This is slightly higher than the average for Wales.

Between 2017 and 2019, attendance at primary and secondary schools was the lowest in Wales and levels of persistent absence were notably high in secondary schools.

The wellbeing of children and young people has benefited from support from the local authority during the pandemic. For example, working with partner organisations, the authority successfully engaged large numbers of children and young people in their 'Summer of Fun' programme in 2021. Hundreds of children and young people participated in sports, play, cultural and family activities. As part of these activities, some families went to a beach for the first time ever. Feedback from children, young people and their parents was positive regarding the support for their wellbeing through the pandemic.

Children and young people contribute to strategic decision making in Merthyr Tydfil, for example through the youth cabinet. Members of this group clearly feel that they have a voice and use this to try and influence decisions that affect them and address

issues they care about, including through their representation on the Education Partnership Panel. The young people led on the development of a young person's version of the local authority's 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy.

## 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 the regional consortium to ensure that school improvement strategies are targeted to meet the individual needs of schools?**

Prior to the pandemic, senior education leaders in the local authority identified the need to secure better improvement support for its schools. This honest self-reflection helped the authority to make changes to its practices and ways of working. Working relationships have since improved between senior education leaders, school leaders and improvement partners from the regional school improvement consortium, Central South Consortium (CSC). Alongside other key stakeholders, the local authority worked with school leaders in developing its 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy. Although in the early stages of implementation, this work is beginning to positively influence leadership and provision in schools. However, it is not possible to evaluate fully the impact of change on the educational progress, wellbeing and outcomes of learners across the local authority at this stage.

The local authority, CSC improvement partners and schools have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in school improvement processes. Schools are more engaged in school improvement processes than was the case a few years ago. This is largely due to the trust and confidence that has developed between the school leaders and their improvement partners, and the greater consistency of improvement partners. Also there is greater collaboration between schools, with cluster working and a more open relationship with the authority and the CSC.

The processes to support school improvement are applied consistently across schools in the local authority. School leaders identify their unique improvement priorities and work with their improvement partners to consider the actions and the support needed to improve. Improvement partners provide, facilitate or broker relevant support and professional learning for their schools in aspects such as governance, leadership capacity or provision for pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. For example, professional learning for teachers on the use of physical objects such as counters or connecting blocks as teaching tools has resulted in improvements in pupils' mathematical skills at a primary school. In addition to bespoke support, all schools have access to support for national priorities such as the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales.

Whilst the process to offer and provide support is consistent, the offer from CSC in a few instances is not sufficiently targeted to the individual needs of schools and the pace of meeting identified needs is occasionally too slow.

The development of the 'Team Around the School' approach provides constructive opportunities for local authority and CSC officers to share valuable information relating to individual school needs and agree actions to address any concerns. Arrangements to intensify engagement with schools that require a higher level of support are appropriate and generally support schools to bring about required changes. This work is often initiated by the 'schools causing concern panel', which is proactive in identifying concerns as early as possible and preventing these from escalating. Schools causing concern in the last few years have improved.

Schools within the local authority have welcomed valuable support throughout the pandemic, for example to develop their blended learning offers and to share ideas about meeting the wellbeing needs of learners, staff and the wider community.

Arrangements to evaluate the impact and the quality of school improvement work are at an early stage of development and occasionally lack rigour and focus.

### **How well do local authority services work together to reduce the impact of poverty and disadvantage on pupils' learning?**

The local authority has high aspirations for all children and young people, including those who face challenges brought about by poverty, as set out in its 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy. This strategy is in the early stages of implementation and we are unable to comment on the sustainable impact of this work.

The authority values its partnerships with third sector organisations and recognises the important role they have in supporting the priority to tackle the impact of poverty on children and young people. The local authority has established a network of services that work with education providers. These include statutory and non-statutory services provided by the local authority and services provided by a range of third sector organisations.

The strategic leadership and governance of multi-service and partnership provision is provided by the corporate Tackling Poverty Strategic Group. The group includes heads of service from across the local authority and considers how resources can be used in a purposeful way to address disadvantage through cross-directorate and partnership working. However, this group is not providing enough support to the implementation of the 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy.

Across services, local authority officers have a comprehensive overview of the needs of vulnerable learners and their families. At operational level, service leaders from across directorates work together well. They have a clear understanding of how their provision is part of a multi-service response to tackle the impact of poverty on education. The Early Help Hub provides a useful central point of contact for families to access support and facilitates effective multi-agency working. This approach avoids unnecessary duplication of services and is helping children and their families receive the right support for their needs in a timely way.

Over the last year referrals from schools to the Early Help Hub have doubled. School leaders value the ways in which the authority has made it straightforward for them to



access support for vulnerable pupils from a wide range of services including Team Around the Family, Families First, the youth service and the parenting service.

The authority provides a range of family learning programmes in partnership with The College Merthyr Tydfil and Merthyr Tydfil Adult and Community Learning. These are particularly aimed at supporting families in challenging circumstances. The programmes help parents to develop the skills and confidence to support their child's learning, for example in early language development and numeracy skills.

Partnerships in the early years are particularly strong and include partnerships with health visitors to encourage good pre-school parenting and with primary schools to support highly effective transition from Flying Start and non-maintained settings. A multi-agency approach ensures that appropriate plans are in place to support children who need additional help when they start primary school. In addition, an early intervention class, located in one of the primary schools, provides tailored provision for individual pupils across the county who are not ready to make the transition from early years settings to primary school and offers opportunities for early years practitioners and primary school teachers to work together.

Over time, the authority has supported third sector organisations with resources and professional learning to help them build their capacity and range of provision. This commitment to partners has been beneficial as it placed the authority in a strong position to deliver the Welsh Government 'Summer of Fun' initiative swiftly and successfully. The authority was able to draw on existing provision to put together a rich and engaging programme, which was well received by children, young people and their families.

Although CSC improvement partners work well in partnership with schools to review in-school approaches to tackling poverty, the local authority strategy to address poverty and disadvantage is not well understood by CSC's strategic leads for tackling poverty.

### **How effective is provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural needs?**

The local authority oversees a range of provision for pupils with social, emotional, and behavioural needs. This includes provision in mainstream schools and more specialist support in the pupil referral unit, out-of-county settings and through specialist tuition. Local authority officers understand their schools well and have established relationships that are built on mutual trust and respect. The services provided by the local authority to support the needs of pupils are well regarded by schools.

The local authority has made effective use of grant funding to promote and support the development of research informed practices that focus on developing learner wellbeing. This is helping to build the capacity of schools to identify and meet the needs of children and young people, including those with social, emotional, and behavioural needs. These developments are welcomed by schools, and the local authority generally has a secure understanding of what practices are being adopted in schools. However, the systematic evaluation of practices, the impact they have on children and young people and how these inform future strategy are underdeveloped.

During recent lockdown periods the local authority audited provision being made by schools for pupils with statements of special educational needs. The local authority facilitated a virtual meeting for additional learning needs co-ordinators. School colleagues shared with others the approaches taken to support learners and their families. Where appropriate, local authority officers followed up with additional advice and support to schools.

The local authority has provided guidance to schools on the use of reduced timetables, with parental consent, for learners who may have found full-time attendance difficult because of anxiety or other reasons. Over the past three years, the number of pupils on reduced timetables has increased, with a particularly sharp increase in both primary and secondary schools during 2020-2021. Many pupils remain on reduced timetables for more than four weeks.

Historically around 70 pupils per year access special tuition for a period of time. This provision is either provided directly or commissioned by the local authority and may be accessed by pupils individually or as part of a group of pupils at a special tuition centre. Around a third of these pupils have been receiving special tuition for between one to two years and nearly all of these pupils have a special educational need including difficulties in relation to social and emotional needs.

Overall, there is a high number of pupils who do not receive full-time education for extended periods of time. The local authority does not monitor closely enough the use of reduced timetables and their impact on pupils' progress. The local authority is unable to provide full assurance that the extended use of reduced timetables is appropriate for the pupils concerned.

The local authority recognises the importance of well-developed speech and language skills in children and young people. Officers understand the links between educational and social outcomes and the generally high proportion of children with emotional and behavioural needs who have speech and language needs. The local authority has systematically screened pre-school children for several years. However, it has only recently started diagnosing using a diagnostic tool to identify speech and language delays in pupils in primary schools. With appropriate support a minority of pupils with delays had made improvements within six months. A minority of primary school pupils receiving support following diagnosis made improvements within six months. The rate of progress made by pupils varies considerably by school cluster, with those pupils attending the pupil referral unit (PRU) making amongst the poorest progress. Overall, the local authority's work with partners to identify and support the speech and language needs of school-aged pupils has not been timely enough.

The PRU makes provision for both primary and secondary aged pupils across two sites. There were challenges in securing learner engagement in remote learning and in attending the PRU when it reopened after lockdowns. Staff at the PRU maintained regular contact with parents. As a result of concerns around the wellbeing of children and young people, there was a sharp increase in the number of referrals made to children's services. The local authority recently facilitated a peer review of the PRU, which very usefully highlighted both strengths and areas for improvement. The local authority accepts that improving the quality of the accommodation is an issue that it needs to address.

## **How well does the local authority use youth work to support young people?**

The local authority values the contribution of youth work to its young people. The authority consistently spends more than most local authorities on youth work services per head of the population. The youth service provides high quality provision in both targeted and open access provision. Youth workers support young people's education, health and wellbeing, and this is often high quality.

The work of the youth service makes an important contribution to the delivery of the 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy. The expenditure on youth work is proportionally consistently amongst the highest in Wales. Leaders within the youth service have a clear vision for the strategic direction of youth work in Merthyr Tydfil. Young people are actively involved in the development of services and activities and are regularly consulted on the provision.

In formal education settings, youth workers deliver programmes that enable targeted pupils to attain qualifications and support most of them to progress successfully to the next stage of education or employment. The number of young people engaged with the youth service who achieve a recognised qualification is consistently above the Welsh average. In addition, youth workers support pupils to increase their self-esteem and confidence. Youth workers and schools communicate and co-ordinate these activities effectively. Schools value the positive contribution that youth work makes to pupils' education and wellbeing and consider it an integral aspect of their provision for learning and pastoral support.

Open access youth work is of a very good standard. Youth club activity is provided through a commissioning model with voluntary providers and is located in the heart of communities in well-equipped facilities. The youth workers engage young people in activities that support their wellbeing, education and their personal and creative development. Young people engage proactively with street-based youth workers. These youth workers know the young people, their families and their communities well. This helps them to identify issues, offer advice and provide or signpost to relevant support if needed.

A notable strength of the youth work provision is the effective partnership working that exists with other departments within the council as well as with a wide range of external agencies and voluntary sector organisations. An example is the Youth Service Partnership Forum chaired by the youth service, which includes agencies from within and outside of the youth work sector. The youth service's partnership with voluntary organisations extends access to a wide range of activities for young people. These include engaging opportunities to mix with young people from outside their communities and participate in valuable activities such as sports development, sailing, artistic expression and empowerment work with girls.

Youth workers provided valuable support for young people during national lockdowns. Their knowledge of young people and their communities enabled them to assist formal education services and to provide vital services to support young people, particularly those who were struggling or who had challenging home circumstances. The youth service has continued to provide strong support after lockdowns lifted. For example, in Christmas 2021 one youth centre stayed open until

Christmas Eve to provide activities to cheer the communities' low mood because of the pandemic.

The youth service developed a digital youth work offer during the lockdowns. For example, youth workers held beneficial online activities including quizzes, podcasts and keep fit classes, which were attended by young people as well as their families in some instances. This highlighted the value of youth work to whole communities. It also provided youth workers with a useful insight into young people's lives as well as creating valuable contacts and relationships with those families. The digital offer includes innovative examples such as the use of hybrid provision, where young people can participate in-person or online at the same time in activities such as map reading exercises or guitar lessons. Street-based teams use online engagement successfully to support young people during poor weather conditions. The youth service recognises the need to evaluate, refine and coordinate its digital offer to share good practice and ensure consistency across its provision.

The Merthyr Tydfil Borough Wide Youth Forum and youth cabinet provide young people with valuable voice within the community. The forum addresses important issues for young people such as period poverty and ensuring the delivery of sanitary products in wellbeing boxes during lockdown. The youth cabinet contributed purposefully to discussions on the effectiveness of online learning arrangements with schools during lockdowns, as well as the development of the RARS 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy. The cabinet promoted the national 'Make your Mark' campaign to encourage young people to engage in democratic processes. This has contributed to Merthyr Tydfil having by far the highest turnout rate in Wales of young people voting in the most recent UK Youth Parliament national consultation on issues affecting young people, and one of the highest rates in the UK.

Welsh-speaking youth workers engage well with Welsh-speaking young people and arrange stimulating activities to promote the Welsh language and culture. Innovative initiatives aimed at developing young people's Welsh language skills have been disrupted by the pandemic and increasing the use of the language is an area for development in the service's strategic plan.

## **Leadership and management**

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for education in Merthyr Tydfil. Their priorities for education are clearly articulated in the local authority's planning processes starting with the 'Focus on the Future' well-being plan. These priorities are understood well, both within the local authority and by partners across the community.

In 2019, the local authority formally requested support from the Welsh Government to address financial issues and concerns about leadership and governance. The Welsh Government set up an Improvement and Assurance Board and, following a rapid assessment of local authority provision, the education service was included as an area that the board would support. In 2020, the board approved the local authority's Recovery, Transformation and Improvement Plan, which sets out the work that the local authority is undertaking as it moves through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Improvement and Assurance Board was still in place at the time of this inspection. Senior leaders have evaluated the progress they have made against the Welsh Government's nine key tests to help them to understand their capacity to sustain and continue the improvement work, which includes the work to improve education services. Leaders recognise the progress that has been made and the work still to do with the transformation and improvement work. They have identified the actions that still need to take place and the key milestones that need to be achieved in order to address fully the criteria set out in the key tests. They have plans to quality assure the work of the education service independently of the board. This includes setting up an internal board to emulate the performance management work of the Improvement and Assurance Board.

The chief executive and the director of education have worked well during the period that the board has been in place to bring about change and improvement in education services. The director of education has forged good working relationships with school leaders. They feel that she seeks and listens to their views and engages them well in the development of strategies and services. In 2021, the education service was restructured to increase its capacity, with two new heads of service appointed. The post of chief officer for learning, together with other chief officers, has been upgraded to a director role in line with the local authority's strategic vision.

The director has led work on the education service's 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy, which provides a clear ambition for education in Merthyr Tydfil. This strategy has been developed following strong engagement with stakeholders, including headteachers, governors, Central South Consortium (CSC) and a range of partners in statutory and voluntary organisations. Implementation of the strategy is still in its early stages.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, education leaders supported schools purposefully. They provided strong support for vulnerable pupils and those that found it difficult to engage with learning through the period when learning was provided remotely. The local authority's work during the pandemic has strengthened relationships with the community and provided officers in the education service with a better understanding of the challenges facing learners and their families. This is helping to ensure the provision of appropriate support and intervention for young people in the county.

Officers have developed an action plan from their Welsh language strategy and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) to promote the benefits of Welsh-medium education and improve standards of Welsh in Welsh-medium and English-medium schools. The strategy aims to create an environment where Welsh is a bigger part of everyday life for people in Merthyr Tydfil – a 'shwmaenronment'. The local authority has recently submitted the interim version of its WESP for 2022-2032 to the Welsh Government. This has plans for a third Welsh-medium primary school to open as a seedling school in September 2023. Most pupils from the two Welsh-medium schools currently transfer to a Welsh-medium secondary school in Rhondda Cynon Taf if they wish to continue their education in Welsh. The authority plans to discuss the potential for additional capacity at this school with Rhondda Cynon Taf and also plans to undertake a feasibility study for its own Welsh-medium secondary school. Although there are no clear plans at this stage, the authority recognises that it must ensure

that there are enough places for the planned increased number of pupils in primary schools to progress to Welsh-medium secondary education.

Leaders recognise that there are a few long-standing issues that require improvement. For example, pupils' attendance levels have been weak historically. The Learning and Local Government Education Services scrutiny committee is provided with worthwhile and detailed reports about the strengths and areas for development of the education directorate, along with progress reports and reports about other relevant key issues. The need to improve the committee and the abilities of elected members to provide appropriate challenge were identified in the last Estyn inspection and in a more recent report by Audit Wales. The council is continuing to respond to weaknesses in scrutiny and has made some improvements. Officers and the chair of scrutiny are aware of these issues, and strengthening scrutiny arrangements is an objective in the 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy. Presently, elected members within the committee do not provide enough robust challenge to the Cabinet member or officers in order to secure sufficient accountability or promote improvement.

The authority places a clear value on open, regular, and critical self-evaluation of its services that allows senior leaders to identify strengths and areas of improvement in most areas. There is a strong corporate commitment to challenging the information and evidence derived from self-evaluation to ensure validity. For example, leaders and managers use specific 'away day' sessions to focus on emerging issues and affirm their judgements around the quality of provision and services. There are also beneficial opportunities for education stakeholders to contribute their opinions and to support and challenge the authority's progress against its ambitions in the Education Partnership Panel. However, in a few areas, systematic evaluation of practices, the impact they have on children and young people and how these inform future strategy are limited, for example in relation to provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Senior leaders use the information they have gleaned from self-evaluation to set suitable goals and priorities and to inform further improvement planning. For example, the directorate has acted quickly and decisively to adjust its key improvement priorities, such as those in the 'Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards' strategy, to outline how it aims to recover from the pandemic. There is clear consistency and coherence between improvement plans within the authority, from the corporate plan through to service level plans and the majority of team plans.

Overall, senior leaders monitor the progress and impact of their identified priorities well. However, there is an inconsistency in the quality of success criteria within the majority of service level business improvement plans, with limited measurable criteria being identified. In these instances, this reduces the ability of officers to monitor and evaluate progress. The recent improvements in the authority's ability to share and use data within education and other departments has begun to strengthen officers' ability to identify trends and monitor performance. The newly established quarterly performance improvement reviews, which are attended by the corporate management team and cabinet members, provide useful opportunities for senior leaders to evaluate their progress against their wellbeing objectives and priorities for improvement. However, the lack of robust success criteria in a majority of business improvement plans, and in-depth evaluation of some areas of the directorate's work,

along with weaknesses in the quality of scrutiny, hinder the authority's ability to fully monitor and evaluate their progress towards their higher-level ambitions.

The local authority has a strong corporate focus on developing staff through professional learning activities. These activities are identified collaboratively through appraisal meetings between staff and their line managers. Line managers ensure that any professional learning identified is relevant to the employee's role, includes personal interests and aligns to strategic priorities. The impact of the professional learning undertaken is considered during follow-up meetings with line managers.

All staff are expected to complete a range of mandatory training, for example on safeguarding, cybersecurity and Welsh language for new starters. As officers develop within the department they become increasingly involved in regional and national groups to support their role, share good practice and increase their awareness of wider strategies and priorities. For example, officers are involved in groups relating to governor support, attendance, exclusions and looked after children.

The authority does not have a comprehensive strategic overview of professional learning within Merthyr Tydfil. This means that they are not able to monitor the full range of professional learning activities and their impact. The authority has recognised this shortcoming and is in the process of addressing it through implementing an electronic performance management system. However, this system is in the early stages of development.

The safeguarding of all children and young people is a high corporate priority and seen as everybody's responsibility. All local authority staff and most elected members have attended appropriate safeguarding training. The corporate safeguarding reference group includes representation from a wide range of local authority departments as well as elected members. The group provides an appropriate central point to co-ordinate the local authority's response to relevant safeguarding concerns. The group meet regularly to discuss local issues and to agree their response. In addition, the local authority has also established other multi-agency groups to help safeguard young people. For example, the multi-agency child sexual exploitation group consider the effectiveness of support for young people most at risk of exploitation.

The local authority has sound safer recruitment practices for all members of staff. Human Resources officers provide beneficial support to schools to undertake thorough pre-appointment checks for staff and volunteers.

Officers, in particular the lead safeguarding manager for education, provide schools with a high level of support and guidance. This includes regular updates on relevant themes including, for example, on dealing with cyber bullying and managing professional concerns. All non-maintained settings and schools submit a detailed annual safeguarding audit to the local authority. Officers evaluate each one and provide written feedback and, if appropriate, bespoke guidance and support for individual providers. Education officers regularly collect information on instances of bullying in schools and analyse the data to determine trends.

The local authority's allocation of resources to its education service and schools reflects the high priority given to education in the corporate plan, 'Recovery, Transformation and Improvement' plan and the Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards strategy. The proportion of funding allocated to education in 2021-2022 is higher than the Indicator Based Assessment and the authority has consistently allocated one of the highest percentages of funding to education in Wales for many years.

The local authority has increased and protected its education budget at a time of budget pressures across the authority and, for 2021-2022, increased its education budget above the Wales average. The authority has increased staff capacity in its services including the appointment of senior officers responsible for inclusion and for achievement and well-being. Currently, the authority is projecting a £218k deficit in its education budget, mainly due to the cost of out-of-county placements.

The local authority categorises the financial risk of each school annually, and three schools currently pose a high risk. The local authority is using this useful early warning system to identify schools for support in addressing emerging financial issues.

Overall, schools' balances increased in 2020-2021 and all schools delivered a surplus, helped by the receipt of additional funding from the Welsh Government. No schools are projecting a deficit for 2021-2022, one school is forecasting a deficit in 2022-2023 and five schools are forecasting a deficit in 2023-2024. The local authority has suitable arrangements to monitor these positions and support the schools in delivering their medium-term financial plans.

The local authority reviewed the funding formula for schools in 2020-2021 in conjunction with the School Budget Forum, which includes headteacher representatives. There is a three-year transition period for schools to plan for any changes resulting from the implementation of the new funding formula. The authority and the School Budget Forum have an open and constructive relationship. The School Budget Forum is engaged in the annual budget process and the authority's medium term financial planning.

There is a comprehensive range of service level agreements (SLAs) for optional services available to schools with generally high levels of take-up. SLAs are reviewed annually with schools and the School Budget Forum, and all SLAs were rated good or excellent. The School Budget Forum has the opportunity to meet with the services to discuss any areas of concern, but not all SLAs suit all schools' requirements and some schools seek an alternative arrangement with a different provider.

The local authority has recently completed its Band A 21st century schools projects and its Band B programme amounting to about £56m is underway. The authority is in the process of carrying out condition surveys of its schools to get an updated understanding of its backlog maintenance. This will be key in helping to inform its medium-term financial planning.

In its previous inspection in 2012, Estyn recommended that the authority develop and implement systems to judge whether initiatives and services have a positive impact on children and young people and offer good value for money. The authority has



done a high level analysis of its expenditure and performance in some key areas and how it compares with other Welsh authorities. There have also been examples where the authority has worked with service providers to review the level, quality and cost of service. However, the authority recognises that it needs to strengthen its ongoing review of services provided by the Central South Consortium to ensure that they add value.

## Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consult the local authority on the local inspection questions to be used during the inspection, based on the authority's self-evaluation, strategic plans and relevant data held by Estyn
- analyse the outcomes from open questionnaires, including the views of learners, parents, school staff and governors, local authority staff, regional consortium staff, elected members and general public
- carry out a preliminary visit to the local authority to meet with a range of relevant partners to education services, such as learner representatives, headteachers and governors, and leaders from statutory and third sector agencies working with children and young people

During the inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet with the leader of the council, elected members responsible for education services, elected members responsible for the scrutiny of education services, the chief executive, the director of education, other leaders and managers in education services, other relevant staff in the local authority, the managing director of the regional consortium for school improvement and other relevant staff from the regional consortium
- look closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- consider the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinise a variety of documents, including information on learner outcomes, information on the performance of schools and other education settings, including information from the regional consortium for school improvement, minutes from a range of meetings, reports presented to council or scrutiny, information relating to the safeguarding of learners and any other information relevant to the local authority's education services held by Estyn

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provide a draft copy of the report for the local authority to note any concerns with factual accuracy, and made amendments where necessary

## Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website ([www.estyn.gov.wales](http://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:

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