



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



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

A report on education services in
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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by

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This report is also available in Welsh.

About Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Rhondda Cynon Taf has a total of 38,497 pupils across 115 schools, which include 17 Welsh medium, 96 English medium and two dual language schools.

Over a three-year average, 24.0% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, higher than the Wales average of 23%.

The local authority's last inspection was in March 2012, with follow-up visits in December 2013, March 2014 and June 2014.

In 2022-23, the local authority's education budget is £269,729,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2022-23 is £4,925, slightly lower than the Wales average of £5,032.

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 Rhondda Cynon Taf is noted below:

- 6.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 13.3%.
- 0.9% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action).
- 1.7% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action Plus).
- 3.4% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Statemented).
- 0.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan).
- 1.4% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A, B or C).
- 16.1% of pupils aged 5 or over are fluent in Welsh, higher than the Wales average of 15.6%.

Summary

Leaders in Rhondda Cynon Taf education services provide clear and purposeful leadership. They are committed to ensuring that children and young people achieve their very best. The leader, chief executive, cabinet member for education, elected members and senior staff in the education directorate have set high expectations for their officers, schools and providers. All officers have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are empowered to take action to provide valuable services to improve outcomes for children and young people across the authority.

Leaders in the local authority make their decisions carefully, based on how best to serve their different communities and to meet individual needs. For example, the council makes effective use of a wide range of data and information when considering school reorganisation and planning. This means that school organisation proposals take good account of the needs of the school's community and promote equity of provision for pupils. However, improving provision for Welsh, for example through late immersion opportunities, specialist ALN provision and improving the outcomes for Welsh in English-medium schools, is at an early stage of development.

Generally, inspection outcomes over time have been sound within the local authority. Since we resumed inspection in February 2022, we asked three primary schools to provide case studies of good practice, one primary school requires special measures, and another primary school was placed into Estyn review.

The director and her senior team work pro-actively in partnership with Central South Consortium (CSC), the school improvement service. The local authority shares explicitly its high expectations of the work of the regional consortium. For example, the local authority is clear about how CSC should support its strategic priorities and directs improvement partners to gather the first-hand evidence required by the local authority. Overall, the quality of support and the information provided by the CSC is too variable.

The local authority places a high priority on supporting its most vulnerable children and young people to improve their outcomes, well-being and life chances and provides helpful support for schools to improve these pupils' attendance and behaviour. Over time, the attendance of pupils in Rhondda Cynon Taf has been lower than national figures and the attendance of those pupils who are eligible for free school meals has remained low.

The local authority has provided particularly helpful support to its schools and settings to prepare for the additional learning needs (ALN) reforms. Staff have benefited from a broad range of professional learning to improve their understanding of how to identify individual needs. A particular strength has been the way in which staff have been supported to develop their understanding of person-centred planning and individual development plans. Overall, support for additional learning needs is strong.

Across the directorate, senior officers and their staff are committed to continuously improving the service they provide. They strive to identify and support future leaders and provide a very helpful leadership development professional learning programme.

A notable strength is the way in which this has supported succession planning and improvements in leadership across the local authority and its schools. The director and her senior team have developed a clear programme for evaluation and improvement, which supports all officers to have a suitable overview of their areas of responsibility. Despite this, self-evaluation and improvement planning processes often lack precision. In particular, officers do not always identify clear indicators of success, and this hinders their ability to evaluate their work precisely and to plan for future improvements.

Leaders in the directorate support staff very well. A particular strength is the way they provide officers with the autonomy to make decisions about how best to support schools and settings. Staff feel valued and well-informed of the direction and vision for improvement in the local authority. Over time, this has supported the local authority effectively to incrementally improve the services they provide.

Recommendations

- R1 Sharpen approaches to self-evaluation and improvement planning
- R2 Strengthen approaches to Welsh-medium education, for example by improving access and support for learners with additional learning needs and providing opportunities for late immersion for learners.
- R3 Work closely with schools, pupil referral units and the regional consortium to build on the local authority's work to further improve attendance and reduce exclusions

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.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare a case study on its work in relation to its use of data to inform planning and decision making and its professional learning for leadership for dissemination on Estyn's 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 44 schools and two PRUs. We judged that standards were good in 26 primary schools and adequate in ten primary schools. Six of these were placed into Estyn review, one into significant improvement and one was judged to require special measures. Of the two all-age schools, we judged standards to be good in one and unsatisfactory in the other and in need of significant improvement. In secondary schools, we judged standards to be excellent in one, good in three and adequate in two. One of these was placed into Estyn review and the other was placed into significant improvement. We also judged that one PRU has excellent standards and the other unsatisfactory standards and this PRU was placed in special measures. All the schools placed into a follow-up category during this time period have since been removed.

Since inspections resumed in February 2022, we have inspected twelve primary schools and one all-age school. We asked three primary schools to provide case studies of good practice, but one primary school requires special measures and another primary school was placed into Estyn review.

Overall standards at the end of Key Stage 4 in the three years before the pandemic were generally in line with national averages, although outcomes in around half of secondary schools were variable during this time. Outcomes for those pupils that are eligible for free school meals in the three years before the pandemic were generally below national averages.

Over time, outcomes of inspections of non-maintained nursery settings have broadly been sound when considering both pupils' progress and well-being.

Outcomes from Estyn inspection reports between September 2017 and March 2020 show that pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning were good or excellent in many schools. This proportion was slightly lower than the Wales average.

Between 2017 and 2019, attendance in primary and secondary schools declined overall. In five of the 13 secondary schools, attendance was below expectations for three years. In secondary schools during this period, persistent absence increased at a greater rate than nationally. The rate of persistent absence in primary schools

remained broadly in line with national figures. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was lower than that of their peers and, in primary schools, it was at least as good as the Wales average but below the Wales average in secondary schools.

Over the period from 2017 to 2019, the rate of permanent exclusions was broadly in line with the national average. There was an increase in the rate of fixed-term exclusions of five days or less over the same time period and the rate remained higher than the national average.

The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has broadly been in line with the average for Wales over the past three years.

Young people participate positively and develop their leadership skills when planning events such as 'Aberdare Pride'. This demonstrates the strong commitment of these young people to promoting equality and diversity throughout their community.

Young people access a wide range of services provided by the local authority to help with their mental and emotional health. For example, over the last three years, a large number of young people demonstrated an improvement in their levels of well-being following counselling sessions.

Through the Youth Engagement and Participation Service (YEPS), young people have influenced positive change in their local community. For example, they have been instrumental in creating digital benches, which provide safe spaces where young people can socialise with their peers. The young people involved in developing this provision have benefited from opportunities to improve their communication, planning and practical skills.

An example of Youth Engagement and Participation work

As part of their work to re-engage young people who have been anti-social in their local community, the YEPS service have worked with young people from across the local authority to develop digital benches in local communities. These benches provide a place where young people can socialise, charge their mobile phones and promote positive behaviour. The young people involved in this programme have developed new skills and been helped to build positive relationships with adults and their peers.

A video about these digital benches can be found here

<https://youtu.be/rj4snCKJ5OQ>

A large number of young people also benefit from one-to-one support and youth club provision provided by YEPS, which helps them to improve their resilience, well-being and mental health.

Education services

How effective is the challenge, support and intervention in improving the quality of teaching and leadership in schools and PRUs?

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the following recovery period, the local authority provided exceptionally strong support for its schools and PRUs. It strengthened significantly its relationship and communication with school leaders. When safe to do so, officers frequently visited schools and PRUs, and this enabled them to develop a deep understanding of providers' specific contexts and the challenges they faced. Importantly, these first-hand experiences also contributed to the local authority's ongoing work to refine its information gathering to support effective school improvement.

The local authority has very effective data systems to capture intelligence about schools and PRUs from across different service areas, such as finance and human resources. Officers have also established several helpful fora, such as the 'All Schools Progress Review', where this data is used to support focused improvement discussions about schools and PRUs. The information helps to develop the local authority's knowledge of its schools and PRUs, enabling officers to identify emerging issues, such as fragility in leadership, in order to provide intervention.

There are suitable procedures for monitoring and supporting schools and PRUs, including robust processes for reviewing those that are causing concern. The local authority tracks the progress of these schools and PRUs rigorously. It makes judicious use of its statutory powers, such as issuing pre-warning notices, to address urgent school performance issues.

There is a well-established working partnership between the local authority and regional consortium. The local authority communicates explicitly its priorities for school improvement, as set out in its current education strategic plan. Senior leaders and officers work proactively with the regional consortium to tailor systems and processes to the needs of the local authority. For instance, they provide detailed feedback on the suitability of reporting processes for sharing information about the support and challenge the regional service provides to each school and PRU. As a result, there are now specific requirements for improvement partners to report on the effectiveness of a school's or PRU's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes, as well as the quality of teaching and leadership.

Over time, senior leaders and officers have provided robust and timely challenge about the quality of the regional consortium's support for school improvement and the effectiveness of improvement partners' work. The local authority has high expectations. For instance, it requires improvement partners to evaluate accurately the quality of teaching and leadership through the gathering of first-hand evidence. Officers monitor the information in written reports carefully and, where needed, work in partnership with the consortium to suggest improvements. This has led to a greater level of helpful detail in the reports for schools causing concern. However, despite the local authority's feedback, the quality of improvement partners' reporting remains too variable. Often, they do not provide enough precise evaluative information, especially about teaching and its impact on pupils' learning and progress. This is particularly the case in the reports for Welsh-medium schools. This makes it difficult

for the local authority to have a full picture of the strengths and areas for improvement in these important aspects of schools' and PRUs' work.

In partnership with the consortium, the local authority provides a wide range of beneficial opportunities for schools to share effective practice related to national priorities. There is a strong focus in local authority termly headteacher meetings on developing a shared understanding of pedagogy and assessment to support schools' curriculum development.

An example of sharing effective practice with schools

In a local authority termly headteacher meeting, primary headteachers from eight schools involved in a collaborative project, facilitated by Central South Consortium, shared their experiences of rolling out the Curriculum for Wales with other senior leaders. This lively 'market place' event created an open forum for valuable discussion and support, as headteachers and local authority officers engaged in professional dialogue with teachers and pupils from the schools involved in the project.

The local authority has longstanding networking arrangements between its schools. This enables schools and PRUs to collaborate and work efficiently on common areas for improvement and to access specialist subject support from the regional consortium. For example, schools in the Aberdare cluster work closely together to improve teaching and learning in mathematics across age phases. In many instances, professional learning for schools causing concern is targeted appropriately to develop their work in specific areas, such as improving pupils' writing skills, based upon careful identification of need. However, in general, professional learning support is not always tailored specifically enough to the needs of other schools. This means that the impact of this support is too variable.

The local authority prioritises the development of leadership in its schools and PRUs, and places a strong focus on this in its work with Central South Consortium. As a result, new and experienced leaders in schools and PRUs benefit from a range of opportunities to improve their skills. A particularly valuable aspect of the local authority's support for leadership is the programme it provides for aspiring leaders. This provision is notable in two respects. Firstly, it is tailored very effectively to the specific needs of Rhondda Cynon Taf schools and PRUs and, secondly, officers use their knowledge of practitioners in the local authority to target prospective participants. The programme, which includes one-to-one coaching, is highly regarded by school leaders and has made an important contribution to succession planning across the authority.

The local authority and regional consortium provide a useful complementary suite of learning opportunities and support for governors. During the pandemic, chairs of governing bodies attended termly meetings online with the director of education and inclusion services, and other senior officers. This new forum was well attended and has since continued to be a useful opportunity for information sharing and strengthening chairs of governors' understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Provision, such as the helpful self-evaluation tool commissioned in partnership with the five local authorities across the region, targets specific

governance needs in schools that are causing concern. Local authority clerking services support the development of governors' skills well.

How effective is the local authority working with its communities to support the most vulnerable learners and what impact is this having, for example on improving attendance, well-being and engagement?

The local authority provided flexible and responsive operational support to schools and other education settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included a strong focus on supporting the most vulnerable learners and their families. Officers have since reflected on how they provided support to vulnerable learners during this period. As a result, the local authority has continued with aspects of the ways of working it developed during the pandemic where these were felt to have ongoing benefits to learners and their families.

The local authority has a good understanding of the needs of individual learners and their vulnerabilities. This includes an understanding of their family and wider social context. For example, the local authority has the highest COVID-19 death rate in Wales and officers are very aware of families that were particularly affected and how this continues to impact on learners' well-being.

Officers that work in services supporting learners' well-being access a wide range of useful data to inform their work. They use this data well to track and monitor learners' well-being. For example, attendance and well-being officers can access live attendance data when visiting schools, which enables them to challenge and support schools appropriately. In addition, officers generally value the voice of vulnerable learners and their families and use their views to help evaluate and shape the development of services.

There is a strong focus in the local authority on supporting children and their families before they reach statutory school age. Through a multi-agency approach with health partners and others, all children are offered a developmental screening check at around 20 months old. Following this, parents are supported well to promote their child's speech and language through one-to-one and community programmes. Through the local authority's Resilient Families Service, these parents are also offered a range of other helpful support to meet their needs.

The local authority provides a range of valuable support services to meet the needs of vulnerable learners. For example, each cluster of schools is able to request a home visit for any absent learner that they feel is vulnerable without the need for attendance to be below a particular threshold. This encourages a preventive approach and allows support to be provided in a timely way. This approach is usually successful in supporting the learner to return to school by an agreed date.

In addition to well-being visits and work with schools and PRUs, staff in the authority's Attendance and Well-being Service work with individual families to encourage good attendance. A pilot intensive support programme for a small group of learners with extremely low attendance resulted in the majority of them gradually returning to school and attending reasonably regularly, and this approach is now being replicated with further groups. Despite using a range of useful approaches, attendance rates in the local authority for the current year are well below those in the

years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this is common to varying extents across Wales, in the Autumn term 2022, the attendance of those pupils eligible for free school meals in secondary schools is notably lower than other pupils.

The local authority historically provided direct support to individual learners whose behaviour at school was a concern. In order to prevent the need to exclude learners, officers now focus appropriately on building the capacity of school staff to build good relationships with learners and use effective approaches to manage challenging behaviour. The local authority also funds targeted schools to offer alternative provision for learners who are at risk of disengaging with their education. Although a few secondary schools have low rates of exclusions, the overall rate of exclusions in secondary schools in the Autumn term 2022 was similar to the rate in the three years before the pandemic, when the authority had one of the highest rates of exclusions in Wales.

The local authority commissions an external independent counselling service that works with children from age 7 in both school and community settings. Overall, this service meets the needs of learners, who access this well. The local authority commissions additional helpful support for children in primary schools affected by loss and trauma.

There is an increasing number of Family Engagement Officers who work out of individual schools and are receiving good support from the local authority. This partnership work is supporting greater use of schools as community hubs for a variety of beneficial services to support vulnerable learners and their families, such as access to food hampers, financial guidance, adult learning and parent and toddler groups.

Youth services are used effectively in schools and communities to support young people across the local authority. They are particularly targeted in areas of greatest need, including communities that have few local facilities for young people. Youth workers in the YEPS support vulnerable young people well who are at risk of not being in education, employment or training. This support continues after statutory school age, helps young people to sustain their initial post-16 destination and, where this destination doesn't work out, helps them re-engage with an alternative provision.

The local authority has recently established a virtual school model for children that are looked after. However, it is too early to judge the overall impact of this on pupil outcomes. The local authority's arrangements for monitoring the provision for looked after children, in out of county placements, is developing appropriately. For example, individual monitoring reports include a focus on the progress, well-being and learning experiences of pupils. However, processes to capture the views of pupils, their aspirations and their future plans are underdeveloped.

How well does the local authority meet the needs of pupils with ALN?

Over time, despite a recent reduction in the number of pupils on the SEN/ALN register, both the demand for ALN support has increased. Overall, the local authority has generally adapted to these changes well. The way in which services interact with schools and PRUs is now more responsive, with a clearer focus on both building capacity in schools and PRUs and, where appropriate, providing advice, support and guidance. In addition, the local authority has used the information it has to adapt and create new learning provisions and close those that are no longer required.

The referrals process for local authority ALN services is generally clear and well understood by schools. However, this can be bureaucratic and place additional pressure on schools' additional learning needs co-ordinators.

The local authority has strengthened its ability to comply with the requirements of the new ALN legislation, for example by recruiting additional officers to work with schools and other settings. This is helping schools and other settings to develop systems to quality assure their work on, for example, person-centred practices and individual development plans. In addition, schools are becoming better placed to both identify and understand universal learning provision. Arrangements between the local authority, early years providers and partners have also been strengthened. Systems and procedures have been enhanced to help identify children that may have an additional learning need as early as possible.

Over time, the local authority established learning support classes in around a quarter of mainstream schools. These cater for pupils with a broad range of additional learning needs. The local authority has taken broadly appropriate action to review provision, including ensuring that, where possible, pupils are able to transition between phases in the same school, thereby reducing movements to new settings. Many of the learning support classes are in the primary schools. Just under half of all classes are for pupils with autism and just over a third are for pupils with complex needs. However, the term 'complex needs' is not always understood well enough, and it is possible for pupils with different additional learning needs and abilities to be placed in these classes.

To address the concerns around exclusions from school, the local authority has provided financial support to schools to develop provision for pupils that are at risk of exclusion. In addition to making 'in-school' provision, schools have secured provision for pupils with a range of external providers, for example to provide work experience placements for a few pupils. Schools report to the local authority's governance group, but the frequency and quality of reporting by schools are too variable. As a result, the local authority is unable to fully evaluate the quality of the provision and the impact it has on pupils. Consequently, it is unclear if the approach provides value for money.

The local authority provides a comprehensive range of very useful professional learning opportunities for school staff. These develop the knowledge and understanding of colleagues on a range of matters including, for example, provision mapping, inclusion for early years settings and legislation relevant to ALN. Despite very positive feedback on these opportunities, arrangements to consider the longer-term impact of these are in the early stages of development.

To what extent does the local authority consider appropriately the educational benefits and risks of its school organisation proposals?

The local authority has successfully delivered a series of school reorganisation projects as part of the first band of the 21st century schools programme. Officers recognise school reorganisation priorities well. They use a good range of information sources, including building condition surveys and research evidence, and they forensically analyse a range of data to help inform their strategic decisions. School reorganisation plans link closely with the authority's priorities in their Corporate Plan and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). The authority communicates clearly with various stakeholders about the roll-out of the school organisation programme as well as how they prioritise urgent repairs and maintenance. It addresses deficiencies in the school building stock, placing a suitable emphasis on health, safety and continuity of business. By investing in new schools and renovation projects, the overall standard of school buildings in the authority has improved over time. The authority is continuing with its improvement work and has increased planned investment to more than £270million.

The local authority's WESP 2022-2032 recognises the need to develop provision for Welsh in education across its providers and to be more proactive in their planning of school places to meet and stimulate the demand for Welsh-medium education. The local authority is developing a better understanding of which locations require support to help meet the demand for Welsh-medium education. It is gradually increasing the number of Welsh-medium nursery education settings through a combination of classes at maintained schools and a few non-maintained settings. Officers value the input of stakeholders such as Mudiad Meithrin and other organisations to help establish wrap-around arrangements when planning new schools. However, plans to establish dedicated late immersion provision to support pupils to access Welsh-medium education at different entry points and plans to improve Welsh provision in English-medium schools are underdeveloped.

The authority also recognises appropriately the need to increase Welsh-medium ALN provision to address the growing demand for specialist support for pupils. The opening of new Welsh-medium learning support classes at Ysgol Gartholwg and the new Ysgol Rhydyfelin will increase capacity for pupils with ALN in the Pontypridd area. However, current provision for full-time Welsh-medium specialist provision for pupils with ALN does not meet the demand across the whole authority.

The authority has rationalised provision for post-16 education appropriately to ensure that young people have access to a more extensive range of academic and vocational courses and a range of high-quality facilities to support their studies. Plans for English-medium sixth form provision in the Pontypridd area are currently in development. The local authority is working with Welsh-medium schools to strengthen the bilingual academic and vocational learner entitlement for these post-16 learners regardless of their location.

The local authority is increasing the number of all-age schools where it deems this to be the most appropriate approach. It has reviewed and evaluated its current provision and used this information purposefully to inform its planning to meet the needs of the local communities. Newly appointed headteachers of these schools

work alongside the reorganisation team for an extended period of time to strategically plan and prepare for the opening of the school.

Leadership and management

The leader of the council and the chief executive have high ambitions for children and young people and their families in Rhondda Cynon Taf and communicate their vision effectively. Elected members, including the cabinet member and the chair of the education and inclusion scrutiny committee, fully support the mission 'To deliver equity and excellence in education and enhanced well-being for all'. Their strong commitment to responding to the needs of their local communities, and particularly reducing the impact of poverty, is reflected well in the priorities identified in the corporate plan, 'Making a Difference'. The high aspiration for education is captured beneath the three main priorities of people, place and prosperity in the pledge 'To ensure the local authority has good schools, so all children have access to a great education'. The corporate plan reflects relevant national and local priorities well, including the national well-being goals.

Overall, elected members have a good understanding of the work of the education directorate and work purposefully with officers. Helpful reports enable them to understand the key issues clearly, for example regarding school organisation proposals, so they can make well-informed decisions. Elected members also demonstrate their commitment to the directorate's priorities by thoughtful allocation of resources.

Prior to the election in May 2022, the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee had responsibility for scrutinising all public facing services working with children and young people, including children's services. The newly formed Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee benefits from a smaller remit, which is now sharply focused on education and inclusion. As many of the committee members are new, the chair has wisely recognised the need to build the capacity of the group. She has done this through facilitating helpful contributions from a well-considered range of officers and headteachers, whilst aligning the agenda well to the cabinet work programme. On the whole, members of the committee challenge appropriately and constructively the information presented and to consider suitably decisions to be taken by cabinet.

The director shares successfully her ambitious vision for education and inclusion. Her commitment and that of her tight-knit senior team to the children and young people of Rhondda Cynon Taf is highly evident, as is their determination to deliver effectively and at pace. Officers at all levels and other partners, particularly schools and PRUs, feel supported and challenged to meet these high expectations. Since being in post, the director has reviewed structures and reframed responsibilities and lines of accountability in line with the key priorities. This has added capacity and sharpened the focus on important aspects such as attendance and well-being. Across the directorate, the roles and responsibilities of officers at all levels are well considered, appropriate and balanced. Officers work well collaboratively on cross-cutting priorities such as developing a highly skilled educational workforce and excellent leadership at all levels.

Senior officers are highly knowledgeable about the aspects of the work that they lead. They consider carefully how best to meet local and community needs as well as national priorities. Their decisions are underpinned by access to a comprehensive data and intelligence system that enables them to monitor schools' performance, respond swiftly to emerging issues and provide timely intervention.

During the pandemic, the local authority developed a digital dashboard, which enables it to draw upon a large amount of 'live' data through integrated systems. This data suite provides officers with the means to identify emerging issues quickly and to plan appropriate actions for the medium and longer term. This information reinforces the very good knowledge of local communities that is held by officers. This combination of knowledge bases has supported effective planning of the authority's significant investment through the Sustainable Communities for Learning fund. It also informs its work when addressing specific aspects, such as the directorate's priority to enhance the well-being of learners and the workforce.

When local authority officers have not had sufficient or suitably detailed information from the regional consortium, they have challenged the quality of reports robustly and outlined their specific requirements, revisiting the agreed arrangements with the school improvement service. As a result of the director's intervention and high expectations, the quality of reporting is beginning to improve.

The work of the directorate has ensured that outcomes for learners in Rhondda Cynon Taf, for both standards and well-being, are generally sound. Despite these strengths, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has been identified by the local authority as a priority, as it is nationally. Officers have recently refreshed plans to tackle poor attendance. These now include innovative practices that were originally set up during the pandemic. Officers target helpful strategies at those most in need of support, such as deploying family engagement officers to work closely with vulnerable young people and their families.

The local authority has identified broadly suitable actions to improve provision for Welsh-medium education through its WESP. In particular, it is beginning to consider how to improve access to late immersion for learners wishing to access their education through the medium of Welsh and to enable better support for learners with additional learning needs. In addition, through its school organisation plans, the local authority is increasing access to Welsh-medium provision in early years settings and maintained schools.. Work to improve Welsh provision in English-medium schools is underdeveloped.

Elected members and senior officers have developed strong working relationships that facilitate effective knowledge sharing. Strategic plans are well aligned, and senior officers understand clearly the way in which the Education Strategic Plan's five priorities support the delivery of the objectives in the Corporate Plan.

The education directorate has outlined a helpful framework for Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review, which aligns with the corporate process and has been summarised well in a visual map. The directorate regularly evaluates its work using the elements in the framework. The local authority has identified well aspects of its work that were particularly effective during the pandemic and used these to shape current activity beneficially. Despite the clear commitment to self-review, the quality

of evaluation and improvement planning is variable across the directorate. In a few instances self-evaluation focuses on the completion of actions rather than the impact of this work. As a consequence, this makes it difficult for officers to draw out the main strengths and areas for development with sufficient clarity or precision for these aspects of their work.

Officers facilitate beneficial opportunities for a range of partners, including headteachers, to share their views and inform the strategic direction of the local authority. However, other stakeholders' views are not always captured as successfully, for example the contribution of children and young people to the decision-making processes.

Many priorities cross service area boundaries, such as the work to reduce the impact of poverty and promote equity in education. In general, officers across the directorate take responsibility well for their particular aspect of this work. The lack of coherence across team plans means that it is difficult to evaluate the individual contributions of service areas and to decide which are making the greatest impact to shared priorities.

Performance management arrangements for individuals are sound. Officers value the support and challenge that the process provides, including the beneficial professional learning opportunities that they can access. The local authority has used the aspiring leaders programme notably well over time to support succession planning and nurture talent in its workforce.

Across the local authority, the safeguarding of children and young people is a high priority. Leaders have developed a strong safeguarding culture where the safety of and well-being of children and young people are seen as everybody's responsibility. This is reflected well in the local authority's policies and day-to-day practice. The corporate safeguarding policy provides a strong framework for each service area and underpins its safeguarding practices. All employees and elected members receive safeguarding training upon appointment and at regular intervals.

The leader of the council and chief executive both have a secure understanding of the local authority's safeguarding responsibilities. The chief executive chairs the corporate safeguarding board. This group provides strong and effective governance. The local authority also works collaboratively with other local authorities as part of the Cwm Taf Morgannwg safeguarding board, for example to share good practice. There is strong education representation on this board.

The local authority has a robust quality assurance process for corporate safeguarding. For example, each service area assesses the quality of their safeguarding practices as part of their annual self-evaluation processes.

Safeguarding officers give schools and other providers a high level of support including beneficial training and regular written updates. School and PRU leaders appreciate the timely and valuable advice that is available to them and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) also provides schools and PRUs with effective assistance.

The local authority collects data from schools and PRUs on bullying and physical intervention on a regular basis. It analyses it thoroughly to determine trends. Officers understand the need to challenge schools and PRUs more effectively to ensure that there is greater consistency in the way that they record and report on all allegations of bullying.

Funding for education is prioritised by the authority. For 2022-2023, the authority increased its spend per pupil for schools' budgeted expenditure by 8.4%, a higher percentage increase than all other councils in Wales. The prioritisation of education funding is also reflected in the significant capital investment in school estates.

The authority has a good track record of managing within its education budget and there were no schools in deficit at the end of 2021-2022. Where schools were in deficit prior to the pandemic, the authority effectively applied its scheme for schools' financing and deficit protocol and overall schools' deficits were reducing.

The authority has a sound understanding of education budget issues and the financial position of individual schools. It makes good use of financial and other data to inform financial planning over the medium term. However, it does not routinely make use of comparative financial data with other local authorities to inform budget planning and monitoring.

The authority provides strong support for schools' financial management and planning, and schools are positive about the support provided. The authority provides a wide range of services to schools through service level agreements and there is a high level of take up of these services by schools.

Appendix 1: CASE STUDY OF INNOVATIVE OR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Name of provider: Education and Inclusion Services

Local authority: Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough

Contact person, email address & telephone number for further information:
Catrin Edwards, Head of Service Transformation and Data Systems

Number and age range of learners:
n/a

Website: <https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk>

Date of Estyn inspection: January 2023

Area of practice which has been identified during inspection:
The use of data across the local authority to inform planning, decision making and support for schools

Inspection area:
IA1, IA2

Context and background to the effective or innovative practice

The development of management information systems (MIS) and the effective use of data and information have been central to the local authority's improvement strategy. In the last inspection in 2012, Estyn identified that the directorate needed to "improve the evaluation and analyses of data across service areas and partnerships to drive improvements in outcomes for learners".

To support this, the local authority focused closely on:

- establishing centralised MIS that facilitates easy access to extensive datasets which are routinely analysed for the purpose of self-evaluation and to drive improvement across local authority services and educational settings;
- developing live datasets where at all possible, analysed in a timely manner to effectively identify underperformance and inform targeted interventions and improved outcomes; and
- using data as a tool for strengthening cross directorate working, strategic planning, local authority and school partnerships.

Description or nature of activity

The Education and Inclusion Service integrated three management information systems and multiple data streams to create one, streamlined data system. This has provided a solid foundation for developing increasingly sophisticated datasets, dashboards and reporting capacity.

This integrated system provides officers with immediate access to an extensive range of data and information relating to schools and services. This along with clear monitoring and evaluation processes enables the local authority to identify areas for improvement and respond rapidly.

In order to secure this improvement, the local authority has:

- strategically reviewed and evaluated systems and data sources;
- ensured that data functions have been retained within one highly specialist Data Team;
- recruited high quality graduates and apprentices via the Council's award-winning scheme, investing in their career progression and learning;
- built in-house capacity, thereby reducing any reliance on external agencies and specialists so that services remain cost effective and efficient;
- supported schools with their MIS systems, including daily system synchronisation and maintaining core data accuracy;
- commissioned a single local authority pupil information system, supported and developed by the dedicated Education Data Team;
- ensured the effective flow of information and data from schools, through the central system and into the appropriate reporting tools;
- developed automated reporting to provide helpful information to support officers in identifying chronological and geographical patterns within datasets; and
- improved more efficient communications and simple data collection approaches.

What impact has this work had on provision and learners' standards?

The availability of live data from 115 schools, across up to 30 services with over 500 users, enables officers to access an extensive range of relevant and up-to-date information. The Education Directorate now has live overviews of a broad range of interactive data.

This information and data is central to all strategic planning and delivery across the Education Directorate, including school re-organisation proposals, service self-evaluation, service review and performance management. Reports to Cabinet and Scrutiny meetings are well informed through access to live datasets.

The local authority uses a broad range of information, including demographic trends, birth data and housing developments to consider school capacities and admissions carefully.

Access to relevant data was crucial in supporting the Covid response. Vulnerable learner identification, particularly where there were associated issues, were targeted well for wellbeing provision and visits, and other support. Cross directorate work with colleagues in Children's Services ensured that schools possessed up to date data on vulnerable learners in their schools according to different categories of vulnerability.

With staff now working in an agile manner, access to operational data on a suitable device has become essential. Attendance and Wellbeing staff now have access to

attendance data on their smartphones and use this to support and challenge schools in a timely manner.

How have you shared your good practice?

Support for Track, Trace and Protect teams during the pandemic enabled structured contact data to be provided directly from school systems in a format suitable for direct upload to Health Systems. This process was shared with all Welsh Authorities. RCT regularly act as the contact and a reference point for specific technical and strategic information and advice. The team are active contributors to Welsh User Groups, via MS Teams technology and since Covid recovery, through face-to-face demonstrations to other local authorities.

Appendix 2: CASE STUDY OF INNOVATIVE OR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Name of provider: Education and Inclusion Services

Local authority: Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Contact person, email address & telephone number for further information:
Gaynor Davies, Gaynor.Davies@rctcbc.gov.uk.

Website: <https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk>

Date of Estyn inspection: January 2023

Area of practice which has been identified during inspection:

The development of future leaders in education through a strong professional learning offer and effective succession planning.

Inspection area:
IA3

Context and background to the effective or innovative practice

The local authority prioritises the professional development of both local authority and school staff well. They are committed to 'growing their own' leaders to support with succession planning and improvement. In response to challenges in recruiting high quality headteachers and senior leaders, the local authority provides a highly effective Aspiring Leaders Programme. This has been modelled on a well-established senior leadership programme for Council staff, and is research informed and focused clearly on leadership in practice. This programme has helped to accelerate the personal and professional development, and growth of future leaders for schools in RCT.

The local authority also makes strong use of apprenticeship and graduate programmes to develop a highly skilled workforce. For example, the highly successful Graduate Scheme provides a two-year work placement and structured opportunities to develop management skills in a dynamic and varied organisation, coupled with a Level 4 Project Management Level Qualification.

Description of nature of strategy or activity

There is a strong culture in the Council of investing in the professional development of its staff. Planning for professional learning and development is directly linked to the delivery of the Council's priorities, including the Corporate Plan and Education Strategic Plan.

The local authority supports the development of aspiring school leaders well. They ensure that middle and senior leaders are offered a wide range of opportunities to develop and improve their leadership skills. The local authority's Aspiring Leaders Programme is a particular strength. These programmes are planned and evaluated

effectively to meet aspiring leaders' expectations and needs and are routinely adapted to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

The RCT Aspiring Leaders Programme is unique in both its design and delivery. The programme is planned in response to the specific needs of the cohort and local and national priorities. It has been particularly successful in promoting both the personal and professional growth of participants. It has supported effectively not only newly appointed leaders, but also the succession planning of senior leaders in all schools in RCT for the last decade.

There is a strong culture of identifying and nurturing potential in employees and the local authority invests strongly in the development of their workforce. For example, local authority staff aspiring to management positions have access to a variety of structured learning opportunities including a broad range of leadership programmes.

Since 2005, many Education staff have engaged in a range of leadership programmes and cross directorate projects, which include developing coaching and mentoring skills and engaging in collaborative research projects.

These broad range of strategies have supported succession planning within the local authority well. Many former apprentices, graduates and trainees go on to secure permanent roles and leadership positions with the Council.

What impact has this work had on provision and learners' standards?

Leadership across the directorate is strong and effective. The broad range of training has supported leaders at all levels to develop a range of skills. They lead well by example and have secured effective improvements across the directorate. For example, the school improvement team have strengthened the way in which they challenge and support the regional consortium to improve the support for their schools.

The local authority aspiring school leaders programme is well regarded by school leaders and has supported the growth and development of these participants well. All of the staff who engaged in the recent programme have secured leadership posts.

Useful links

[Apprenticeship Scheme & Graduate Programme | RCT - Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council \(rctcbc.gov.uk\)](#)
[RCT EET - Step In The Right Direction – YouTube](#)



Aspiring Leaders
Programme RCT.doc

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)

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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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