



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

**Report following monitoring of  
Local authority causing significant concern**

**Wrexham County Borough Council  
The Guildhall  
Wrexham  
LL11 1AY**

**Date of visit: July 2023**

**by**

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

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

## Outcome of visit

Wrexham County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the 2019 core inspection and will be removed from the follow-up category of causing significant concern.

## Progress since the last inspection

### **Recommendation 1: Urgently improve outcomes for learners, particularly at key stage 4**

Since the core inspection, the local authority has reviewed beneficially its arrangements to support school improvement. A few key appointments have added valuable capacity to the work of the service. Officers in the local authority work closely with the core leads and supporting improvement advisers (SIAs) from the regional consortium, GwE. Schools can access a broad range of professional learning opportunities and relevant support from subject supporting improvement advisers (SSIAs) in the regional consortium. The work of these partners is now more complementary, and schools have a clearer understanding of the role that each play. Most headteachers are positive about improvements in the quality of support provided by the local authority team.

There are now stronger systems in place to gather feedback from school improvement focused visits. Notes of visits record appropriately the activities undertaken, which provide a clear overview of helpful support. The local authority does not review or challenge the evidence they receive well enough to ensure it gives them a robust view of the impact that support has on learning in the classroom and standards overall.

Officers have established several helpful approaches that support leaders in schools and settings to secure improvement. These include '360' reviews, where officers support school leaders to gather evidence about aspects of the school's work that complement the school's own quality assurance calendar. In addition, the local authority has encouraged providers to work together in 'Alliances' promoting valuable collaboration between schools focused on common areas of interest or similar priorities. These promising approaches are at an early point in their development, and it is too soon to evaluate their impact on learning and progress.

Officers from across the service now participate constructively in regular 'Team around the school' and multi-agency group meetings. These fora provide officers with suitable opportunities to consider the most appropriate support for each provider, and to review feedback from officers, SIAs and SSIAs. Schools that require more intensive support are discussed at termly 'Quality Board' meetings and further actions decided. As this quality assurance cycle is still in its first iteration it is too early to evaluate the impact of the approach.

The local authority now has a firmer grasp of the overall strengths and weaknesses of its schools, particularly regarding leadership and provision. In general, officers

identify schools causing concern at an earlier stage, particularly when support is needed for leadership. There are fewer schools causing concern in the local authority than at the time of the core inspection. However, the local authority's evaluation of the learning and progress of pupils overall does not draw well enough on first hand evidence and relies too heavily on recent outcomes at key stage 4.

### **Recommendation 2: Improve attendance, well-being and behaviour of secondary school pupils**

Since the time of the core inspection, the council has allocated additional resource to secure improvements in the Education and Early Intervention service. This has allowed the chief officer to restructure the service and successfully develop its capacity to support attendance, behaviour and well being. The appointment of a third head of service to lead inclusion and additional learning needs (ALN) has developed and strengthened the local authority's provision for these areas.

Officers across the service are passionate and committed to achieving sustained improvements in provision and outcomes for pupils. Since her appointment, the head of service for inclusion and ALN has evaluated carefully the local authority's provision and made key changes to respond to the issues identified. This has led to improvements in the support for attendance and behaviour offered to schools and pupils across the authority. The authority has recently appointed an officer to take strategic responsibility for the development of a positive behaviour strategy in schools from September 2023.

The local authority has developed an effective strategic approach to improve attendance. The local authority analyses attendance data forensically to identify patterns and trends across schools, clusters, year groups and groups of learners, including pupils with additional learning needs and pupils who are eligible for free school meals. It has reviewed its policies and procedures to promote good attendance following the pandemic and shared guidance with schools, including the use of fixed penalty notices.

Educational social work (ESW) officers hold regular meetings with senior leaders to discuss school level data and strategies to promote good attendance. These meetings focus effectively on key issues such as the use of the 'B' code to record absence and the barriers to good attendance facing individual pupils. The ESW service provides valuable support to help schools address persistent absenteeism and works within the 'team around the school' approach to tailor approaches to the needs of individual schools. In addition, the local authority effectively shares information about attendance and exclusions within 'Team around the school' and multi-agency meetings. Staff across service areas and GwE are aware of strengths and areas for improvement in attendance and exclusions in individual schools and often work together to offer support for related issues. For example, the alternative pathway service supports pupils who do not regularly attended school to re-engage with school life. As a result, overall attendance figures for Wrexham compare favourably with attendance figures for Wales.

The local authority is developing its provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties appropriately. Provision includes 'Stiwdio Hafod' where Year 7, 8 and 9 pupils access support for a fixed period before returning to mainstream

provision. Work to develop an engagement centre including therapeutic provision is ongoing. The local authority is beginning to support pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion appropriately through the alternative pathway service. This service works closely with schools to develop a bespoke package of support for individual pupils. They advocate for individual pupils and broker support from other areas within the education and early intervention service to help pupils engage with their learning and maintain their places in mainstream schools. For example, the alternative pathways service works with youth service, youth justice and Active Wrexham team to offer support to re-engage pupils with learning. The local authority is beginning to see how this work benefits individual pupils although it is too early to see the impact on exclusion data. In addition, it has reviewed its exclusion procedures suitably to ensure permanently excluded pupils access education in a timely manner.

The local authority has a better understanding of the factors, which negatively affect the well being of children and young people. Officers effectively analyse information from pupil surveys to identify issues, inform plans and offer support. The health and well being team works well with schools and clusters to identify patterns and trends and to develop school health and well-being action plans. Most secondary schools engage positively with the health and well being team and collaborate appropriately to develop their provision around the key issues identified.

### **Recommendation 3: Strengthen joint working across service areas relating to all aspects of well-being**

The local authority has established an effective collaborative and co-ordinated approach to joint working across services. Teams now have the required capacity and expertise which allow them to support schools and individual pupils appropriately. The restructure of local authority services together with the co location of teams contributes successfully to the collaborative working and joined up service delivery. This supports pupil well-being in schools well.

Across the education service areas roles and responsibilities are clearer than at the time of the inspection. The authority maximises its resources and officers' level of expertise effectively through the strengthened collaborative working arrangements. To further strengthen multi-agency working the authority has established a well-being group with representation from the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), school improvement services, schools, and local authority officers. This group provides a co-ordinated approach for supporting in schools, which includes training and interventions. Emerging trends and issues across services and schools are identified allowing professionals to prioritise resources.

The local authority has introduced a range of relevant assessment tools in schools to gain a deeper understanding of pupil well-being. Officers analyse the assessment data effectively and collaboratively with schools to target appropriate interventions for individual pupils. These interventions frequently involve cross service working and external agencies involvement where appropriate. As a result, interventions are person-centred and support pupils to maintain their placement in mainstream schools. Suitable quality assurance arrangements are in place across the service areas to secure improvement.

Officers work well with schools for the development of whole-school approaches to emotional health and mental well-being to further strengthen arrangements for pupils. As a result, schools have a better understanding of the factors that negatively impact pupil well-being to target support more effectively.

#### **Recommendation 4: Improve the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning across all education services**

The chief executive has provided measured and thoughtful strategic leadership to effectively support improvements in education services since the inspection in 2019. A new chief officer for education and early intervention was appointed in 2020, and she has led a cultural shift in how education services work together to address the recommendations from the inspection. She also led a restructure of the department and made some key appointments to build capacity in important areas of work. The co-location of staff working in the education and early intervention department has supported stronger integrated working.

The council leader and lead member for education were both in post at the time of the inspection. Despite initial disappointment at the outcome of the inspection, they recognised the need for improvement and have ensured that the council prioritises this. For example, the council committed an additional £500,000 to the annual budget for education and early intervention services.

The local authority has developed a helpful, systematic approach to evaluating education services and planning for improvement. Plans to improve education services are clear at strategic and operational levels, and actions are targeted appropriately at areas in greatest need of improvement. While the quality of planning has improved since the inspection, business plans are sometimes unclear about how the impact of actions will be measured.

For this monitoring visit, the local authority provided ‘position statements’ that summarised an evaluation of the progress that officers felt had been made since the inspection. We broadly agree with the local authority’s own view of progress, which shows that officers are evaluating their services more effectively than at the time of the inspection.

Various processes have been established in recent years to enable officers to monitor and evaluate actions and to identify areas for improvement. Lead officers are being held to account effectively for the performance of their service areas or teams. There is an effective, graduated pathway for escalating concerns about individual schools and planning collaboratively across services and in partnership with GwE to support school improvement. While the quality of reports prepared by officers to support evaluation processes has improved, these reports sometimes focus heavily on activities completed without considering well enough the impact on learners.

The membership of the council’s lifelong learning scrutiny committee changed following local elections in May 2022. Members of the committee have received useful training to support them to carry out their role. The committee is providing a satisfactory level of challenge to the council’s lead members in relation to the post-inspection action plan and wider education matters.

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