



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



**A report on education services in
Carmarthenshire County Council**

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by

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This report is also available in Welsh.

About Carmarthenshire County Council

Carmarthenshire County Council has a total population of around 187,900. The local authority maintains one nursery school, 94 primary schools, 12 secondary schools and one special school. The authority also maintains three pupil referral units. The Chief Executive began in post in June 2019 and the Director of Education and Children's Services was appointed in December 2016. The Leader of the Council has been in post since May 2022 and the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services began in post in May 2017.

The local authority's last inspection was conducted in 2012. Carmarthenshire County Council is one of three local authorities that formed a new partnership, namely 'Partneriaeth', which supports schools, for example with the curriculum, after the ERW consortium came to an end.

In 2022-2023, the local authority's net education budget is around £184,708,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2022-23 is £4,958, which is below the Welsh 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 Carmarthenshire is noted below:

- Twenty-three point six per cent (23.6%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, which is similar to the Welsh average of 23.3%.
- Thirty-nine point five per cent (39.5%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 are fluent Welsh speakers, which is above the national average of 16%.
- Seven point five per cent (7.5%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minority backgrounds, which is below the Welsh average of 12.6%
- A total of 165 children are looked after by the local authority
- Twenty-four point nine per cent (24.9%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning needs
- Two point four per cent (2.4%) of pupils have English as an additional language

Summary

Carmarthenshire's education services are led robustly by senior leaders and elected members, who share a clear vision for education within the authority. This is supported by an open and positive culture and self-evaluation and improvement planning processes that are rigorous, on the whole. Through this, leaders have a positive effect on improving education provision and learners' outcomes in most of their areas of responsibility and are able to set a clear direction for further improvement in the future. In a very few areas, procedures for monitoring, evaluation and planning for improvement have not succeeded in addressing minor shortcomings, as identified in this report.

The authority has productive working relationships with schools and other providers. This contributes beneficially towards ensuring that new initiatives, changes in provision and sharing of ideas happen jointly, in partnership. The recent work to strengthen support in terms of supporting behaviour in schools, providing an additional ALN resource and establishing immersion resources for the Welsh language are good examples of how the authority is acting strategically to improve provision.

The authority has valuable and purposeful school improvement processes. These are based on a close working relationship between the authority and its schools, which has a positive effect in terms of providing suitable intervention for schools. Despite this, the impact of support for secondary schools varies and there is not a strong enough focus on ensuring the quality of the support and challenge provided for primary and secondary schools to reduce the variation in school improvement processes.

On the whole, arrangements for modernising and re-organising the authority's schools are robust. A strong element of this work is the close cooperation with a good range of external partners, which has a positive effect on the provision available to learners, for example when establishing a 'Vocational Village' in Llanelli. There are also purposeful arrangements in place to ensure that pupils with additional learning needs are identified at an early stage and that suitable provision is in place to meet those needs, in most cases.

During the last year, the authority has taken rapid steps to refine provision to support and improve behaviour within schools. There is a strong strategic direction for this work, with these recent changes beginning to have a positive effect on behaviour in schools. The authority shows a clear commitment to improving attendance and there has been strong progress in a minority of schools. However, the authority's attendance rates remain low and improvements across schools have been varied.

Over time, the inspection outcomes of schools in Carmarthenshire vary, although more recently, since 2022, the proportion requiring follow-up activity by Estyn has decreased. Two secondary schools and five primary schools have also been asked to present a good practice case study. Overall, evaluations of well-being have been consistently good in most inspections, with most pupils showing positive attitudes to learning.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve pupils' attendance in the authority's schools
- R2 Strengthen school improvement processes, particularly for secondary schools
- R3 Refine approaches to self-evaluation and improvement planning

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 publication of the inspection report.

Main findings

Outcomes

We were unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes. This is as a result of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the inspections of schools and most other education providers to be suspended since March 2020. It is also a result of the lack of data on outcomes that can be compared over time because the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded. This also affected most of the other data that we consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations, but we have recently begun to receive this type of data again.

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

On the whole and over time, the inspection outcomes of schools in Carmarthenshire vary. Between September 2017 and March 2020, we inspected 44 settings. This includes 38 primary schools, four secondary schools, one special school and one pupil referral unit. Of the primary schools, 16 were judged to be in need of follow-up activity, including statutory follow-up activity in three of those schools. One secondary school and one special school were judged to be in need of Estyn follow-up. One pupil referral unit was also judged to be in need of statutory follow-up. Following improvements, none of these providers is in need of follow-up.

Since February 2022, when we resumed school inspections following the pandemic, 38 settings have been inspected. This includes 27 primary schools, four secondary schools and 7 non-maintained nurseries. Overall, outcomes are positive and two secondary schools and five primary schools were asked to submit a good practice case study. However, one secondary school and two primary schools were judged to be in need of statutory follow-up. Three primary schools were judged to be in need of Estyn review.

Between 2017 and 2019, the performance of most secondary schools in Carmarthenshire was in line with, or better than, what is expected in key stage 4. The performance of a very few secondary schools was lower than expected. Pupils who are eligible for free school meals performed in line with the Welsh average.

Ensuring high levels of pupil and staff well-being is a priority for the authority. The judgment on well-being and attitudes to learning was good or better in many of the inspections in Carmarthenshire during the inspection cycle from September 2017 to

March 2020. Of the 44 schools inspected during this period, well-being and attitudes to learning were good or better in 35 of them, with the judgement being adequate in the remainder. In the inspections that have been conducted since Estyn resumed school inspections in 2022, judgements for well-being have been consistently good. In these inspections, most pupils felt safe at school and knew how to stay safe online. Pupil behaviour was a strong overall feature in these schools, with most pupils demonstrating positive attitudes to learning. This is also reflected in the pupil exclusion data. Over the three years up to 2021, the rate of exclusions for five days or fewer was consistently below the national rate, in addition to the rate of exclusions for more than five days. Over the same period, the rate of permanent exclusions was significantly lower than the national rate. However, the authority's attendance rates, including those of pupils who are eligible for free school meals, are below the national averages.

Schools, youth services, authority staff and external agencies work closely together to provide strong support to vulnerable pupils. This contributes well to reducing the number of pupils who are not educated in mainstream schools and ensures that nearly all pupils continue in education, training or employment after they leave school.

There are regular opportunities for pupils to contribute to corporate decisions. For example, a forum of secondary school pupils recently reviewed plans for cuts to the Council's expenditure. Pupils have also been influential as the authority reviews its post-16 provision. Opportunities for pupils to develop their leadership skills and influence decisions within the authority's schools is a strength.

Education services

How effective are school improvement processes in terms of improving the quality of teaching and school leadership?

Carmarthenshire local authority has a close working relationship with its schools. The school improvement service's education support advisers (ESAs) foster a positive and supportive relationship with the authority's schools. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and during the subsequent recovery period, the authority recognised the need to renew its understanding of the context of individual schools and help schools to re-establish their quality assurance processes. As a result, it conducts beneficial visits to support schools to collect evidence of teaching and learning as part of its school improvement programme. Valuable activities such as learning walks, scrutiny of work and seeking the pupil's voice are part of these processes. This information enables advisers to identify key issues and provide suitable intervention, as necessary.

Overall, the authority differentiates the help and support provided to schools appropriately, including for schools that cause concern. Over the past two years, officers have identified that a few primary schools need more intensive support. The authority uses appropriate processes and structures to discuss and broker beneficial support for these schools. Case management meetings are held regularly to discuss the issues that are causing concerns in schools. When appropriate and as part of this

process, the authority uses methods such as pre-warning notices to address urgent issues in schools. Currently, one secondary school and two primary schools are in need of statutory follow-up after an Estyn inspection.

School staff have access to a wide range of relevant professional learning through the local authority and the 'Partneriaeth' service. 'Partneriaeth' provides national leadership programmes, support for newly qualified teachers and professional learning for the Curriculum for Wales. Recently, the school improvement service adapted its professional learning offer in response to feedback from schools and the scrutiny committee's discussion about professional learning needs within the authority's schools. This led to a revised professional learning offer to respond more robustly to the practical needs of schools as they prepare for, and implement, the Curriculum for Wales. The School Improvement Team and the Education and Children's Services meets the professional learning needs of primary schools well. 'Partneriaeth' provides beneficial support to secondary schools through networking opportunities, for example through the subject networks for middle leaders where qualifications and the needs of specific subjects are discussed.

The authority provides beneficial opportunities for schools to share effective practice through networks, practice-sharing events and a valuable digital platform. Following the pandemic, the authority has prioritised re-establishing opportunities for schools to work together through peer work. This co-operation within clusters of schools is developing appropriately.

The authority identifies strengths and areas for improvement appropriately within primary schools. Overall, it provides good support to help them plan for improvement, including tailored support. Valuable co-operation and beneficial use of expertise within the ESA team helps the service to respond constructively to the needs of primary schools. Education support advisers also engage appropriately with secondary school leaders as part of their school improvement role. Information is collected about the priorities of school development plans, arrangements and processes. However, when considering secondary schools, officers do not evaluate or challenge information about strengths and areas for development incisively enough. Often, they do not consider specifically enough how improvement plans and support that they have designed jointly with these schools have an effect on improving teaching, learning and leadership. This means that the authority does not know its secondary schools as well. Throughout, there is not a strong enough focus on quality assuring the support and challenge provided to primary and secondary schools to reduce the variation in the services' school improvement processes.

The local authority provides a valuable range of help and support to governors, including a suitable professional learning programme and support through providing useful resources. In a few schools, this includes opportunities for governors to develop their understanding of self-evaluation processes by shadowing the visits of education support advisers.

How well do the authority's school modernisation and re-organisation arrangements ensure appropriate education provision for all children and young people, including pre-school and post-16 education?

The authority has a clear strategy for modernising and re-organising its schools, which is based on sound principles and objectives. The strategy reflects the authority's desire to create a range of high-quality schools, which meet the needs of their current and future learners. There is an appropriate link between the objectives of the school modernisation strategy, the council's well-being objectives and the education service's ten-year plan. This includes the vision to ensure that children and young people have the best possible start in life, as well as making their communities safe and prosperous. The authority has specific plans for providing community facilities to reduce the effects of poverty on the achievement of pupils and young people. For example, facilities have been provided as part of the scheme at Ysgol Rhys Pritchard, Llandovery, to promote good engagement with pupils, their families and the community.

The commitment of the authority's senior leaders, the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Members with responsibility for Education and Children's Services to realising the strategy is a positive feature. They work effectively with the school modernisation team and other stakeholders to review the strategy and ensure that it ties into, and responds to, the authority's current requirements. For example, they have adapted the strategy to support the Curriculum for Wales, the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) 2022-32, and have responded to challenges, such as recruiting school leaders in rural areas of the county.

The head of the school modernisation team, together with this colleagues, provides very beneficial leadership and support to officers and elected members on matters relating to the strategy. They hold a suitable range of workshops to update elected members on progress against the priorities in the modernisation strategy and inform them about current and future challenges. This prepares them well to make important decisions in relation to the strategy. The team makes good use of sources of information and data to identify priorities for the school modernisation programme and plan ahead as necessary. For example, they use the findings of building condition and capacity surveys, school population forecasts and area birth rates when drawing up plans. This ensures that they consider the demand for provision for three-year-olds and before- and after-school care when planning new buildings.

A strong element of the modernisation team's work is its close co-operation with a good range of external partners, school leaders and officers across the authority. Co-operation between the team and stakeholders enables them to respond promptly to new requests and priorities. For example, they have recently established temporary centres for pupils with additional learning needs to meet the growing demand for specialist services in primary schools. They have also worked successfully with secondary school leaders to improve the range of courses available for their pupils. A good example of this is the 'Vocational Village' that has been established in Llanelli.

Cameo: Vocational Village

The 'Vocational Village' was established in Llanelli to increase the number and range of vocational courses available to pupils in the area, including a dedicated construction skills centre. The alliance of Llanelli secondary schools includes the four current 11-16 learning settings, namely Bryngwyn, Coedcae, Glan y Môr and St John Lloyd, the 11-19 bilingual learning setting at Strade and Heol Goffa special school, along with post-16 provision at Coleg Sir Gâr. The concept of the 'Vocational Village' was developed in each of the learning institutions to enable pupils to further develop specialised vocational skills. The development provides the following facilities in particular:

- Bryngwyn – Construction Skills Education Centre
- St John Lloyd – a specialist catering training facility and small training restaurant
- Y Strade – a music technology facility
- Coedcae – a performing arts and media facility
- Glan y Môr – a caring and childcare facility

The local authority has used capital grants to invest significantly in a range of capital projects since they began the strategy around twenty years ago. During this period, the numbers of schools and pupil referral units has decreased from 150 to 111. This contributes towards one of the main objectives of the school modernisation and re-organisation strategy, namely to develop an efficient and sustainable school network. The strategy also places a firm emphasis on improving post-16 provision by investing in extensions or new schools. For example, a large-scale re-organisation project was undertaken in terms of secondary and post-16 education in the Dinefwr, Gwendraeth and Amman Valley areas by re-organising the learning settings of five secondary schools into three bilingual 11-19 learning centres.

Although the delivery of this programme has been delayed slightly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school modernisation team has ensured that consultations and key decision-making processes have continued, as well as construction. Overall, many of the authority's projects over the past five years have focused appropriately on renewing its complement of schools by erecting new buildings, with a very few proposals to consider re-organising education by area. However, delays in decision-making, including following formal consultations, have meant that the authority has not addressed its plans to re-organise and modernise education in full.

The school modernisation team is leading the way in beginning to respond to the ambitious priorities of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) 2022-32. Beneficial co-operation between the members of the Sustainable Communities strategic focus group and the Welsh language strategic focus group ensures that the authority identifies opportunities to improve provision for the Welsh language across their schools. For example, they have built a new Welsh language immersion centre in the Gwendraeth Valley area to support pupils who are new to the Welsh language, as well as producing statutory consultations to respond to requests from schools that wish to move along the language continuum by changing the language of provision. One of the strongest features of the school re-organisation strategy is its work to expand Welsh-medium provision in urban areas of the county. A notable example of this is the establishment of the dual stream provision at Ysgol Pen Rhos, Llanelli, to

provide opportunities for primary age pupils to access Welsh-medium education in their local area.

How well do the local authority's education services promote positive behaviour and good attendance in its schools?

The authority has a clear vision for providing behavioural support to schools, pupils and their families. This is based on ensuring equity for pupils, building positive relationships between staff and pupils, and understanding the reasons behind any challenging behaviour. This work has a strong strategic direction. A clear 'four stage' plan is used, which includes definite structures to scale the response to support pupils' behaviour. However, not all schools implement the vision in line with the authority's expectations.

During the last year, the authority has taken swift steps to refine provision to support and improve behaviour within schools. This includes appointing a well-being and support officer for each secondary school and ensuring that there is a specialist teacher and link assistant for each cluster of schools. These staff offer training to school staff and timely support when concerns arise. Overall, these steps to improve behaviour support have been well received by school leaders and have led to improving the schools' ability to respond to some of the challenges they have faced following the pandemic.

The authority evaluates the impact of its work in this area regularly and refines provision as required. This includes regular multi-agency strategy meetings where there is an opportunity to discuss any behavioural themes within schools or individuals that cause concern, and to decide on the most suitable intervention to use in each case.

The authority ensures the appropriate use of its resources to support pupils with profound emotional and behavioural needs. For example, it has modified provision to enable pupils to attend specialist centres to promote their emotional and behavioural skills on a part-time basis, while continuing to attend the home school for a time. This arrangement also facilitates the ability for pupils to return to their mainstream school successfully in due course. A quarter of pupils in key stage 3 who attend the specialist centres now do so under this arrangement.

Improving attendance is one of the new Cabinet's priorities. Although the authority has identified attendance as an important area that is in need of attention, improvements across schools have been varied. There has been strong progress in a minority of schools, although the authority's overall school attendance rates remain stubbornly low following the pandemic.

The authority has a clear procedure to support school leaders to analyse attendance rates. This helps them identify trends and areas for improvement in their schools. It has also developed a school attendance self-evaluation toolkit to support schools to reflect on their arrangements.

Education support advisers discuss attendance concerns during their regular meetings with senior school leaders. However, steps to address the issues are not always detailed enough and these steps are not always monitored closely enough.

Concerns about attendance and the improvement rates of specific schools are discussed at case management meetings. The authority continues to refine its processes and has introduced new arrangements recently to strengthen its work in this area. However, work to improve attendance is not always co-ordinated and procedures for raising concerns about attendance are not always clear. Although the authority has identified good practice within this area, to date, it has not shared these practices across its schools effectively enough.

How successful is the local authority in ensuring that pupils' additional learning needs are identified at an early stage and that suitable provision is in place to meet those needs?

Officers have a sound understanding of the specific needs of the children and young people of Carmarthenshire who have additional learning needs (ALN). They organise a range of suitable provision for them.

Officers are fully committed to the principles of the new legislation and are leading the process of transforming provision for ALN robustly. They have a clear vision that is based on exercises that place appropriate emphasis on the views of individuals. This ensures that provision gives suitable consideration to the aspirations and needs of pupils.

The authority places a suitable emphasis on ensuring that universal learning provision of a high standard is available to all of the authority's learners as a starting point. Officers work effectively with providers to identify pupils' needs at an early stage. This includes an effective strategy for the early years, where officers co-operate with other providers and services, such as health visitors, to respond to the needs that arise. The authority provides appropriate training for the early years workforce to empower them to support children to thrive in their own settings.

The authority provides a range of useful training for school staff, which contributes effectively to identifying pupils' needs at an early stage. This includes a range of remote training and screencasts on a wide range of ALN issues. These are supported by useful guidance documents, for example to assist school ALN co-ordinators to meet the requirements of the new legislation. The authority promotes co-operation among schools to help them implement the guidelines. They also hold a conference for ALN co-ordinators, which is a beneficial opportunity to share effective practices to support pupils. It also provides useful training for governors, which helps them to understand the school's role in supporting pupils with ALN.

The authority ensures that practitioners in settings and schools have the skills necessary to identify needs and receives referrals from specialists such as health service staff. It also provides a useful direct referral line through the authority's website to enable parents to express concern or seek support. Inclusion panels consider referrals and reviews appropriately and effective use is made of Family Liaison Officers to share findings with parents and explain what happens next. The authority offers provision for learners, together with information for their families, equally in Welsh and English.

Officers provide beneficial support for practitioners to ensure that appropriate pupils have a suitable one-page profile, which identifies the most effective methods to

support them. A digital platform is used increasingly effectively and consistently to create and maintain individual development plans (IDPs) for schools and the authority.

The authority maintains a suitable range of specialist provision in special units or schools, which meet the needs of pupils well. This includes special classes that are an integral part of the inclusive provision of the authority's schools. For example, pupils who attend Canolfan Elfed are integral members of the Queen Elizabeth High School family and share experiences alongside their peers in mainstream provision, where appropriate. Suitable arrangements are made for the very few pupils who need specialist provision outside the local authority. The authority provides beneficial support for pupils with ALN who also have English as an additional language, for example by investing in learning assistants who speak Ukrainian and Arabic. The authority provides beneficial opportunities for pupils with ALN to continue their post-16 education in schools and they co-operate increasingly effectively with further education institutions to respond to the aspirations of young people.

At a strategic level, senior officers plan the specialist provision appropriately. For example, recently, the authority has invested significantly in additional provision to support learners with ALN following an increase in the number of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders. Over a twelve-month period, they have increased the number of places available in specialist locations across a number of sites. However, over time, a very few pupils have had to wait for extended periods to gain full access to the specialist provision they need.

The authority has a robust dispute resolution process in place. This includes suitable roles for school staff, authority staff such as Family Liaison Officers and input from appropriate external bodies. As a result, very few appeals or requests for reconsideration arise within this area.

Leadership and management

Senior leaders have established and communicated a clear vision, together with sensible and appropriate strategic aims and objectives for its education services. The authority has competent leaders and there are robust procedures in place that enable them to realise their priorities appropriately. The Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Members for Education, the Chief Executive and the Director of Education and Children's Services have high expectations of officers, schools, other providers and partners. They gain the trust of these stakeholders and others through transparent communication, and provide a robust sense of direction for the authority.

The Chief Executive has been instrumental in establishing a very positive culture that permeates the authority's leadership and management structures. She encourages the entire workforce to act in an open and transparent manner, engendering a culture that creates opportunities for officers and members to hold discussions about difficult and complex issues in a positive, mature and professional manner.

The Leader of the Council has a clear understanding of the objectives and priorities needed to respond to local, regional and national challenges. The Cabinet Member

for Education and the Welsh Language also has a strong knowledge of his areas of responsibility. He provides a clear direction for education services and is passionate about improving education within the county. By working with elected members and the Council's Cabinet, they act purposefully to strengthen education provision, such as increasing the availability of ALN resources. However, in a very few cases, some of the authority's objectives, such as school modernisation, have not been achieved in a timely enough manner.

The Director of Education and Children's Services conveys his vision and intentions clearly and transparently to relevant groups and consults with them appropriately. He succeeds in expressing his vision for education services effectively and has created a culture of meaningful leadership amongst his team. He is a prominent strategic leader who drives the vision with energy and determination. For example, he recognises sensibly that it takes time to establish sustainable education services and has developed an action plan for the next decade, giving very robust consideration to the principles set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. These are also given good consideration in the Council's strategic plans. Over time, the comprehensive review of the work of the education services and children's services has led to a balanced sharing of roles and responsibilities across the service to respond to the needs of residents, providers and the need to deliver appropriate services.

The authority has effective oversight and scrutiny processes. The chair and members of the Education, Young People and Welsh Language Scrutiny Committee have a clear and mature understanding of the role of the committee and are supported effectively by the authority's officers and senior leaders. The chair of the scrutiny committee has a good overview of the service's priorities and appropriate knowledge of relevant education issues. Elected members play a leading role in monitoring the progress of the education service's strategic plan. A good training programme supports the scrutiny arrangements to promote committee members' understanding of their responsibilities and the issues that are in need of their attention. The scrutiny programme is organised purposefully, with flexible opportunities to add items for scrutiny as necessary, which enables them to make timely and informed decisions. Leaders and officers of the education service provide appropriate information which allows elected members to make informed decisions on complex issues. The quality and usefulness of the scrutiny reports have improved over time and they are now more concise, relevant and purposeful.

Leaders have a good understanding of the main strengths and areas for improvement in terms of their education services. This is as a result of self-evaluation processes that are, on the whole, rigorous and include a useful analysis of a wide range of information, alongside fairly robust progress-monitoring processes. The authority welcomes the views of stakeholders, such as headteachers, parents, children and young people and residents on a fairly regular basis to reinforce its understanding of people's views about the quality of its work and to tailor services for the future. There are obvious strengths in the way in which the authority welcomes the views of pupils and includes them in decisions.

The authority has clear and robust procedures for planning for improvement. Leaders develop improvement plans that use the information obtained from the self-evaluation arrangements and are based on sensible first-hand evidence. It includes prudent

consideration of relevant external reports and national aspirations, such as the aim to increase the number of Welsh speakers within the authority.

Leaders act meaningfully to ensure a clear alignment between corporate level improvement plans, such as the Corporate Strategic Plan (2022-2027), the Education Department Plan (2022-2032) to faculty plans, such as plans to develop the school curriculum and pupils' well-being. This is helping to promote a strong understanding among leaders and officers of their main aims and objectives for improvement. Officers, schools and other stakeholders are also clear about the authority's and the education service's key priorities.

Planning for this methodical improvement ensures clear successes in terms of strengthening provision and improving pupils' outcomes and well-being in several aspects. For example, the authority's work has recently been to strengthen its support in terms of supporting behaviour in schools, providing an additional ALN resource and establishing immersion resources for the Welsh language effectively. On the whole, plans focus relevantly on the main areas for improvement, but in some areas, such as improving attendance, the authority does not succeed in realising its plans in a timely enough manner. In a few areas, opportunities to set sufficiently incisive success criteria within plans are also missed, at times.

The authority has demonstrated its ability to respond quickly to challenging situations, such as its response to the challenges involved in providing services and support during the COVID-19 pandemic and during the subsequent recovery period. The decision to tailor and build on the work of the strategic groups established at that time is a robust example of how the authority has implemented its learning from that difficult experience.

Cameo: A collaborative method of discussing, challenging, monitoring and leading the work to meet the priorities of the Education Service

In order to respond to challenges during the pandemic, the authority established a number of groups to communicate and come to joint decisions with schools and other partners. This was a useful method for reaching agreed decisions and to ensure a clear flow of communication. The authority builds on these experiences by tailoring the groups and establishing a range of strategic groups. The strategic groups, which include members from the authority's leaders and officers, headteachers and other multi-agency representatives, are now a core part of discussing, challenging, monitoring and leading the work of meeting the education service's 8 main priorities. The groups are as follows:

Focus Group	Priority area / aim
Inclusion and Engagement	Ensure a proactive, inclusive education system
Teaching and Learning	Ensure excellent progress for all learners
Child Safeguarding	Ensure that all children and young people are happy, safe and thriving and overcome poverty
Well-being	Foster very good mental and physical health for all

Leadership	Ensure that ambitious leadership leads to excellent progress for all learners
Sustainable Communities	Deliver high standards of bilingual education in environments that focus on the increasingly modern and sustainable community
The Welsh Language	Ensure successful bilingual and multilingual development for all
Departmental Operations	Provide high quality support services that affect the efficiency of the education system

The authority is alert to the growing challenge that exists in terms of reducing the inequalities faced by children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over recent years, the rate of pupils that are eligible for free school meals has increased significantly within the authority from 16.5% in 2019 to 23.9% in 2023, which is closer to the national rate. Leaders have recently established a corporate strategic plan to set their vision and plan across the authority's departments in terms of how to mitigate the effects of poverty. This includes identifying the contributions that the education service can make to this work. There are a number of beneficial activities that contribute towards reducing the effects of poverty, such as the toy appeal at Christmas. The strategic plan relating to poverty also includes a number of beneficial actions for the future, but it is currently too early to see the effect of this work.

There are robust arrangements in place to evaluate the effect of improvement plans that identify the extent to which the authority is meeting its objectives and how close it is to achieving its agreed aims. A good example of this is the quarterly performance reporting processes that use transparent information about performance. This is reported regularly to the scrutiny committee and, as a result, senior leaders and elected members are familiar with the rate of progress against priorities, and challenge and support as necessary. Senior leaders of the education service also meet regularly to discuss progress, taking into account information and evaluations from the strategic groups that are linked to the education department's main priorities. On a more practical level, leaders usually take appropriate remedial action when slippage is seen against improvement aims.

Leaders and managers have developed an effective and conscientious team of staff. They model and promote professional values and behaviours that contribute positively to effective co-operation between staff, schools and partners. The corporate learning development team has promoted valuable motivation and mentoring opportunities for education services officers.

The authority uses reasonable and sensible arrangements to manage staff performance and identify and develop their professional learning needs. These arrangements, namely 'Recognising and Growing Together', ensure a supportive atmosphere for staff to develop and learn professionally. Officers appreciate the support and challenge that the process offers, including the beneficial professional learning opportunities from which they can benefit. Development objectives for individuals focus appropriately on addressing the needs of the service, in addition to respecting the professional aspirations of officers. Together, the performance management approach and the appropriateness and effect of professional learning,

have a good influence on the ability of staff to perform appropriately in their role, motivate them and improve their performance.

There is a comprehensive corporate programme of beneficial online training for staff, which includes important and up-to-date issues, such as safeguarding. There are appropriate examples of officers taking advantage of useful professional learning to improve aspects of their work, such as managing staff and supporting change.

Safeguarding children and young people is a corporate priority. It is seen as everyone's responsibility. All centrally employed staff and elected members complete relevant safeguarding training. The corporate safeguarding policy sets out the local authority's arrangements for safeguarding children and the business plan addresses key priorities for improvement. The corporate safeguarding group includes representatives from different service areas and provides strong leadership. Elected members receive safeguarding reports and data and challenge them appropriately.

The school safeguarding and attendance team provides useful timely advice and high-quality training to schools. Officers are experienced and support schools exceptionally well with all safeguarding issues. They also provide beneficial pastoral support to designated safeguarding persons, when necessary. All schools have access to a social worker and a direct family engagement worker to receive additional advice and support on safeguarding issues. This is a strength in terms of the authority's arrangements. Officers monitor each school's safeguarding practices effectively through an annual audit. They respond comprehensively to each school's audit and challenge areas of concern. From this analysis, they also revise their support for schools and forward plan and tailor subsequent workforce training. However, the local authority does not currently collate data from its schools on issues such as allegations of bullying and, as a result, officers cannot analyse or address trends. Safeguarding officers work productively with different teams, for example the behaviour support team, to provide beneficial support to vulnerable pupils and their families. They also refer schools to other organisations when appropriate, including voluntary ones.

Funding for education is prioritised by the authority. Leaders have a good understanding of their financial situation within the education service and are aware of the financial challenges. The authority has funded situations that are beyond the control of schools, such as pay awards in full. The school budgets have been protected over the last four years, although they are required to make savings during the 2023/24 financial year. The prioritisation of education funding is reflected in the obvious capital investment made through the school modernisation strategy.

There is a structured approach to monitoring school budgets, including their use of grants. The authority encourages schools to plan financially in the medium term and they are given valuable support in terms of their management and financial planning. The authority uses its data to compare the operating costs of its schools and shares this information with headteachers. There is effective communication between schools and the authority through the School Budget Forum and the meetings are well attended. The Forum considers relevant issues, including setting the authority's annual budget and ongoing reviews of school finances and funding formulae. The authority has a range of service level agreements and most schools take advantage of these. Service level agreements and contracts are reviewed regularly.

Overall, school balances were in deficit by £2 million in 2019-20. School balances, as in other authorities, have increased significantly to £15.2 million at the end of 2021-22. However, there was a deficit in the financial balances of 21 of the authority's schools at the end of 2021-22. Although the authority has arrangements to accept plans from schools to recover the deficits, in many cases, there are no plans in place to respond to the deficit. Consequently, there are implications for the sustainability of school budgets.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consulted 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
- analysed 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
- carried 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:

- met 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
- looked closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- considered the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinised 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 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:

- reviewed the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, standardise and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provided 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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