



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

**A report on the quality of local authority education
services for children and young people**

in

**Conwy County Borough Council
Bodlondeb
Conwy
LL32 8DU**

March 2011

by

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

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on their capacity to improve.

In these evaluations, we use a four-point scale:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Unsatisfactory

The report was produced in accordance with section 38 of the Education Act 1997, the Children Act 2004 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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Context

Conwy County Borough is centrally located in north Wales. It has a population of 111,400. In Conwy, 34.3% of people over the age of three speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 25.6%.

Conwy has the lowest proportion of residents of working age in Wales at 58.7%. Of these, 26.8% are economically inactive, which is slightly lower than the 27.2% across the whole of Wales. Of the working age population in Conwy just under 13% have no qualifications, which is below the Welsh average at 15%.

The percentage of Conwy pupils of compulsory school age eligible for free school meals is 18.1%, similar to 18.9% nationally. This level of eligibility is the 11th highest in Wales. Only four of the 71 areas in Conwy are in the 10% most deprived areas within Wales.

Ethnic minorities account for 1.1% of the population, which is lower than the Wales average.

The Welsh Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for Conwy County Borough Council for 2010-2011 was £1,698 per head of population. This is at the average level across Wales. As in the past, the council set its overall revenue budget at about 98% of SSA, allowing it to maintain very low levels of Council Tax.

In 2010-2011, the council set its education budget of £4,981 per pupil net of grants. This is well above the Welsh average of £4,816 per pupil.

Welsh Government figures show that the authority delegates 75% of the available education budget to schools. This level of delegation is in line with the Welsh average.

Summary

Overall judgement: Good

The local authority's education services for children and young people are good because:

- children and young people achieve good standards at the end of key stage 3 and key stage 4;
- very few learners leave school without a recognised qualification and this is among the best in Wales;
- support for school improvement is good and the promotion of social inclusion and wellbeing is excellent; and
- there are positive relationships and good communication between elected members and senior officers within the education service. This contributes to a team ethos that helps to deliver the service's strategic and business plans.

Capacity to improve: Good

The local authority has good prospects for improvement because:

- the authority has effectively managed the development of its Primary Schools Modernisation Strategy and has considered well the options for the reorganisation of existing secondary school provision; and
- the authority has a good track record of continuous improvement. It has responded well to the recommendations from the 2008 Estyn reports of education and youth support services.

Recommendations

In order to improve, the authority should:

- R1 continue to develop quality improvement measures to ensure that strategic evaluations show how well provision meets learners' needs;
- R2 evaluate the impact of increased delegation of funding to schools on outcomes for pupils with additional learning needs;
- R3 ensure that clear and transparent criteria are used for the allocation of schools to different categories of performance within the authority; and
- R4 improve the monitoring of training for child protection and safeguarding.

What happens next?

Conwy County Borough Council will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 50 working days of receipt of the report.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Good

Standards: Good

The performance of pupils at all key stages is generally at expected levels around the Wales average. Levels of free school meals in Conwy are near to the Wales average.

In 2010, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected level at key stage 1 was just below the average for Wales. At key stage 2, performance was also slightly below average on the core subject indicator (the expected performance in English or Welsh, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum), though equal to or above the average for Wales in each of the core subjects. Performance in around half of Conwy schools is above the average when compared with that of similar primary schools in terms of free school meals benchmarks.

In 2010, the average performance of pupils at key stage 3 in the core subject indicator was above the all-Wales average. Average performance in the main indicators at key stage 4 was similar to or above the all-Wales averages; the proportion of pupils gaining the level 2 threshold including English/Welsh and mathematics was eighth highest in Wales. When compared with similar secondary schools, around half of Conwy schools are above the average.

With the exception of one indicator in 2009, Conwy met or exceeded all of the Welsh Government benchmarks for performance at key stage 3 and key stage 4, from 2007 to 2010. Pupils make good progress in gaining skills in first and second language Welsh and, overall, achieve good standards in both subjects. Literacy skills in key stages 1 to 3 are above the Welsh average. By the end of key stage 3, numeracy skills are above the Welsh average. The gap in performance between boys and girls at all key stages is similar to the Wales average. Particular groups of learners, including those from vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, usually attain at or above their expected levels. Learners who are looked after by the local authority have good outcomes.

Very few learners leave school without a recognised qualification and performance on this indicator is among the best in Wales. The percentage of learners not in education, training or employment has improved and is now better than the Wales average, as is the percentage remaining in full-time education at post-16.

The local authority youth service has made good progress since the last inspection in developing opportunities for young people to achieve accredited outcomes as a consequence to their involvement in the service. The limited data available on the achievements of young people in informal and non-formal settings indicates that these young people achieve well. However, the Children and Young People's Partnership has not effectively analysed available data in order to measure accurately the standards young people achieve through informal and non-formal education.

Wellbeing: Good

Standards of wellbeing among young people are generally good.

Young people engage well with the learning opportunities available to them. The level of pupils' attendance in primary and secondary schools is good. Attendance is well above average when compared to that of similar schools on the free-school-meals benchmarks.

Many of the young people who need help to continue in education respond well to good targeted support work and develop the skills and confidence to take up a course or employment.

The average number of days lost through all fixed term exclusions means Conwy was the fifth best performing Welsh local authority in 2009-2010. There were no permanent exclusions. Good management systems are in place to identify young people at risk of exclusion and to manage moves where appropriate. This raises the number of pupils excluded for six days or more but, due to the managed process, these young people avoid exclusion and continue to receive education while outside of the school. Where pupils attend pupil referral units, most respond very well to carefully-tailored support and they re-engage well with mainstream schools.

The number of young people attending the local authority youth service is good at 23% of the population. Young people engage well in programmes that promote healthier lifestyles. Pupil and parent evaluations, service monitoring and school reporting indicate that pupils are increasing their engagement in health and wellbeing initiatives that promote healthy eating, exercise, awareness of substance misuse and sexual health. Young people also develop improved self-esteem and communication skills through the peer education and support roles offered by these programmes.

The number of young people in the youth justice system is reducing. More young people are successfully avoiding offending because of effective early intervention by the youth offending team and the local authority youth service.

Young people engage well with the local authority and its partners through the various school councils, and the youth council. Young people contribute well to the development of planning and policy and raise awareness of young people's issues among key elected members and officers.

Key Question 2: How good is provision?	Good
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Support for School Improvement: Good

The local authority has established a strong collegiate culture with its schools based on mutual trust, confidence and highly valued support. Since the previous inspection, there has been increased rigour in the authority's challenge to schools and it is starting to tackle underperformance more robustly. Although the authority is quite small, it is very supportive and responsive to the needs of schools.

The local authority provides schools with a very detailed analysis of data. Schools have a clear and thorough understanding of their performance in key indicators in relation to that of similar schools and benchmarks.

The authority has made good progress in developing a system to allocate primary schools to different categories of performance. It makes good use of data and other information, including classroom observations, to do this. Primary schools know which category they are in and understand the reasons why they are there. However, the criteria are not always sufficiently specific. In general, the authority then uses this categorisation well to target support to the needs of the schools. The very few schools that are placed in the lowest category receive systematic, well-planned and effective support.

Secondary schools are not categorised in the same way but the authority uses its comprehensive performance information to conduct thorough and challenging reviews. Recently, there has been a markedly increasing pace in the intervention and support given to address the weaknesses in one secondary school. The authority has started to challenge and support them robustly. However, this is only just starting to have an impact on standards.

Governors are familiar with the categories of schools and their individual profiles in primary schools. They are clear about their role in acting as a critical friend and are aware of the Core Data Sets and families of schools.

The authority supports schools well in meeting a wide range of needs, including curriculum development, and supporting and developing leaders and governors. Officers are accessible and responsive, and provide useful and sound advice. The authority meets the appropriately identified needs well through a wide ranging programme of in-service training, in-school support and collaborative work between schools. A key part of this provision is the strategic use of Curriculum Services and Cynnal, which provide curriculum support services that are shared with other local authorities. The authority has provided good support for the introduction of the Foundation Phase and for the development of literacy and numeracy. The development of information and communication technology is particularly good.

Support for Additional Learning Needs: Good

The additional learning needs service provides good quality information, guidance and support to schools through close partnership working with a wide range of agencies.

In accordance with national priorities, the authority has made good progress in reducing the number of statements of special educational needs by replacing these, wherever possible, with parental contracts. These contracts ensure that pupils still have access to good quality services and support to meet their identified needs. The authority completes 91% of statements within statutory timescales. This is in line with the national average.

There are good systems in place to ensure the early identification of a range of medical needs in pre-school age children using health visitors. These arrangements

mean that the authority is able to integrate most pupils successfully into mainstream settings, rather than place them in specialist provision.

Clear exit and entry criteria determine the levels of support to meet a range of pupils' specialist needs. Schools clearly understand decisions made at multi-agency moderation panel meetings.

The service provides a wide range of high quality training to schools. Specialist services, such as those for dyslexia and speech and language, carefully monitor the effectiveness of their training and provision and clearly demonstrate how they improve outcomes for pupils.

There are very good systems to track the progress of primary age pupils with additional learning needs in literacy and numeracy. The authority uses this information well to target the deployment of specialist support assistants. The authority is in the advanced stages of adapting its primary data tracking system to enable it to collect accurate secondary pupil additional learning needs data.

The authority provides good information for parents, including on how to access mediation services. There is good provision for parents and pupils to contribute their views in regularly held reviews of pupils' progress. 'Talk Time' provides good monthly opportunities for parents to have direct access to the educational psychology service.

Promoting Social Inclusion and wellbeing: Excellent

The local authority promotes social inclusion and wellbeing very effectively. The Education Social Work service ensures that vulnerable groups are looked after well. It has introduced a useful multi-agency forum to review vulnerable learners' support needs. The service monitors attendance trends effectively and provides good targeted support to schools. Its Authorised Absence Nurse has provided excellent support, such as family intervention therapy, to pupils registered absent through illness.

Strategies to support teachers in managing pupils' behaviour are good and help to avoid exclusions. Effective deployment of behavioural specialist teaching assistants gives schools skilled, targeted support. There are good arrangements for arranging school moves for learners at risk of exclusion.

The authority supports looked-after children well. A recently developed forum, to promote awareness of the needs of looked-after children, has further strengthened the authority's role as a corporate parent. This forum includes three elected members, and aims to ensure that members' strategic planning is based on good quality information about looked-after children. It is too early to judge the strategic impact of this forum.

The authority has helped schools to develop and customise anti-bullying policies well and raised awareness about bullying behaviour. The authority monitors incidents of bullying and racist behaviour effectively.

Specialist services provide good support for Gypsy Traveller children and those who have English as an additional language (EAL). This has impacted on improvements in attainment and attendance of the supported pupils.

The educational psychology service has an excellent programme that improves primary school pupils' emotional health. The impact of this sector leading programme is evaluated very clearly and findings have been shared with other sector partners, a few of whom have adopted the programme.

There is useful targeted provision providing good support for vulnerable learners and those who are at risk of disengaging with services, including the provision of appropriate vocational courses.

The local authority has a clear policy and procedures relating to safeguarding. Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau disclosures are in place for adults working with children. Appropriate and comprehensive safeguarding and child protection training is in place. However, the way that training is monitored means the local authority cannot be completely certain about whether a very few staff have yet to receive training.

Access and school places: Good

Admissions arrangements within the authority are co-ordinated effectively across community, foundation and voluntary aided schools. The information provided to parents is transparent and clear. The admissions forum is effective in its work and almost all parental preferences are met. Appeals are dealt with appropriately.

The authority regularly reviews the sufficiency of early years and play provision and, overall, it meets the needs of children and their families. It has good procedures in place to monitor and improve the quality of this provision. Training needs are well identified and the impact of training is evaluated effectively.

Systems for forecasting pupil numbers, and the requirements for places, are effective and take into account the impact of collaborative arrangements for learners aged 14 to 19. Asset management planning is good and the authority's information on the capacity, condition, sufficiency and suitability of school buildings is accurate and regularly updated.

Since 2008, the authority has reduced the overall capacity of its schools. However, the most recent data shows that the authority has a slightly higher percentage of surplus places than the all-Wales average in both the primary and secondary sectors. Very few schools are oversubscribed.

The authority has developed its Primary Schools Modernisation Strategy well. The project has been well managed and based on transparent and effective engagement with stakeholders such as headteachers and governors. The objectives appropriately include the reduction of surplus places.

The authority has considered well the options for the reorganisation of existing secondary school provision. It has made a well-informed decision that extensive

reorganisation of its existing secondary schools is not a viable option at present. However, plans are being developed to utilise surplus places through collaboration with the local college, with specialist area teams and with catchment primary schools.

Overall, there is good co-ordination of youth support services. There is effective mapping of the services that are needed. There is a good range of provision that allows young people access to their entitlements.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?	Good
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Leadership: Good

Elected members and senior officers work well together. At a corporate level, they have progressed effectively the authority's key education priority, its Primary School Modernisation Programme. They have also ensured that education services are well resourced. These leaders consistently demonstrate good understanding of the importance of open communication and engagement with all stakeholders. This helps to ensure that decisions are taken on the basis of sound information and with as much transparency as is possible.

Effective engagement with partners, based on positive relationships and good communication, is also a feature of leadership within the education service. These qualities contribute to a positive team ethos that helps to deliver the service's strategic and business plans. These plans are clearly linked to the authority's Community Strategy and Corporate Plan, which reflects relevant national and local priorities.

Key elected members and senior officers meet regularly with managers from each service, including schools, in order to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Portfolio holders have a very good understanding of their areas of responsibility. There is general support across all political groups for the work and direction taken by the education service. The scrutiny process is well organised. Work programmes for scrutiny committees and the cabinet are aligned well to ensure that there is no delay in decision-making. This approach ensures that members of all political groups are engaged in contributing to decisions and in monitoring progress. The system works well and, as a result, the Cabinet rarely has to reconsider its decisions at the request of scrutiny committees.

Quality improvement: Good

The authority has a good track record of continuous improvement. It has responded well to the recommendations from the 2008 Estyn reports of education and youth support services. The authority has good consultation processes with stakeholders for education services and Partnership work. Senior officers and elected members work together well to ensure improvements to services, for example in addressing the underperformance in the number of final statements issued within 26 weeks.

The Children and Young People's Partnership is the responsible body for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of all services to children and young people in

Conwy. Overall, the partnership is making good progress in securing robust systems for quality improvement.

Since the previous inspection, the Children and Young People's Partnership has developed and implemented a good 'Quality Framework' and 'Quality Action Plan'. This framework gives the partnership responsibility for risk management, performance management, evaluation, resource management and planning for all service areas. The clear focus on outcome-based planning and resource management through service area reviews give good prospects for further improvements to be planned and prioritised across the partnership.

The authority has good self-evaluation processes across all service areas. Good consultations with a range of stakeholders, such as headteachers, contributed well to the self-evaluation report, and data informed the evaluation well across many areas. However, data available was not comprehensive enough for the authority to give a completely accurate assessment of progress of groups of learners in a very few areas such as wellbeing and informal/non-formal learning programmes.

Generally, the authority knows itself well. However, it did not provide enough strategic evaluation of how well activities achieve results that meet strategic priorities and learners' needs.

Good practice is shared well through activities such as the good practice workshops, the community of practice website, Core Aim Group performance reports, Improvement Boards, and evaluation reports.

Partnership working: Good

The Children and Young People's Partnership performs a key role in leading collaborative working well. It effectively draws together groups such as health and social care teams, the police and education workers. As a result, these groups build a good shared understanding of the needs of young people and learners and help to deliver strategic and business plans. Young people and learners are given good opportunities to influence and direct the work of the partnership well.

The Local Service Board has been effective in establishing a common model for performance management across the statutory partnerships, based on the local authority's model. The Children and Young People's Partnership has a good quality assurance framework and reporting process. The regular performance reports map progress against actions well and identify where there may be slow progress. However, these reports tend to focus more on describing what has been done, and not enough on the difference the work makes for children and young people. The Children and Young People's Partnership is putting measures in place to improve evaluation of outcomes.

Changes to the way services are planned and evaluated now present more secure evidence for service providers and the partnership board to make useful decisions about commissioning and de-commissioning services. This focus on evidence-based change instead of budget-led change helps managers engage more confidently in joint working and sharing resources. The partnership support team facilitates well

the sharing of resources between partners, for example through sharing premises. Child and adolescent mental health (CAMH) services have reduced costs and improved how and where they meet with young people.

The authority has increased the range of learning opportunities available to learners through good co-ordinated planning and co-operation between its secondary schools and Coleg Llandrillo.

The local authority has increased the capacity and range of support available to improve quality of learning through good partnership with neighbouring authorities. Conwy engages well in a consortium of six north Wales authorities that is planning regional shared services.

Resource management: Good

The high level of funding allocated to the education service demonstrates the authority's commitment to education.

The service has a history of good financial control. There are good recent systems in place to manage resources well across the Children and Young People's Partnership. Officers have a clear understanding of the financial position, and undertake monthly monitoring of budget positions. In 2010-2011, the service identified at an early stage, and reported to scrutiny, a projected overspend on the placement of pupils with additional learning needs in schools outside the county. As a result, the authority has used a transparent process to consider and approve a business case that should result in increased funding for 2011-2012.

The total financial balance held by schools remains high, but has fallen in the last two years. The authority anticipates a further significant reduction at the end of 2010-2011. The authority requires schools to explain high balances but is careful to avoid inadvertently encouraging schools to spend unnecessarily. Despite the authority's efforts, a very few schools have not fully realised opportunities to use their reserves to address necessary improvements in standards.

The authority makes very good use of comprehensive data about the quality of buildings to target its use of capital resources so as to ensure good value for money. However, there is less consistency in the use of data to support the targeting of some elements of revenue funding and in evaluating whether it achieves value for money. For example, the authority does not collate enough data about the outcomes for pupils with additional learning needs in secondary schools. This makes it difficult to evaluate fully the impact on standards and costs of the recent decision to delegate additional funding to schools. As a result, the authority does not have a complete overview of whether all services for learners are delivering good value. However, given the levels of spending within the education budget and the outcomes achieved overall, the education service provides good value for money.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

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