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Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

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

in

**Wrexham County Borough Council
Guildhall
Wrexham
LL11 1WF**

November 2010

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

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Wrexham is located in North East Wales and is bordered by Flintshire to the north west, Denbighshire to the west, Powys to the south and England to the east. The total population is 133,207.

In Wrexham, 17.6% of people over the age of three have at least one or more skills in the Welsh language (i.e. speaking, reading or writing) compared to the Wales average of 25.6%.

Overall 64.3% of the population in Wrexham are of working age. Of these 18.5% are economically inactive, which is significantly lower than the 24.6% across Wales. Thirteen point eight per cent claim some form of Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) allowance. Of those claiming job seekers allowance, 31.3%% are under 25 years of age. This is lower than the 34.2% for Wales.

Of the working population in Wrexham, 11.2% have no qualifications, which is lower than the Wales average of 13.7%.

The percentage of Wrexham pupils of compulsory school age eligible for free school meals is 19%, similar to 18.9% nationally. This level of eligibility is the 10th highest in Wales (PLASC 2010). Only six of the 85 areas in Wrexham are now in the 10% most deprived areas within Wales.

As of 31 March 2010, Wrexham had 100 children being looked after by the authority. There were 119 children on the Child Protection register. Ethnic minorities account for 3.5% of the population, similar to the Wales average.

Funding

The Welsh Assembly Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per head of population for the Wrexham for 2010-2011 is ranked 21st in Wales, consistent with recent years. The council has traditionally set its overall revenue budget marginally below SSA.

In 2010-2011, the council set the education budget at a level of 99.1% of its indicative budget allocation (IBA). The ratio for 2010-2011 is close to the average for other local authorities in Wales. The net education budget per pupil is £4,907, which is a little above the £4,816 average for Wales.

The budget delegated to primary schools (£3,629 per pupil) is below the average of £3,698. However, the budget delegated to secondary schools (£4,288 per pupil) is a little above the average of £4,194.

Summary

Overall judgement: Adequate

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

- children and young people make steady progress and achieve good standards at the end of key stage 3 and 4; and
- the authority has improved its support and challenge to schools.

However:

- the authority has not made enough progress in reducing surplus places and in making sure that sixth form provision provides value for money; and
- there are too many secondary schools with deficit budgets.

Capacity to improve: Adequate

The local authority has adequate prospects for improvement because:

- elected members and senior officers have good working relationships and engage well in a range of partnerships; and
- there is an increasing emphasis on self-evaluation.

However:

- most individual services do not evaluate outcomes consistently enough to target support effectively and there is not a clear shared overview of performance across the authority; and
- there is not enough clarity about the authority's priorities for education.

Recommendations

In order to improve, Wrexham County Borough Council needs to:

- R1 clarify the objectives for education within the council's priorities and reflect these within its plans;
- R2 make sure that the roles of executive board and scrutiny support effective decision-making to improve services to children and young people;
- R3 improve the quality and consistency of evaluation of services to better inform planning;
- R4 develop consistent arrangements for reporting performance in education services and across the Children and Young People's Partnership;
- R5 reduce surplus places in secondary schools in line with the council's realigned strategy for school reorganisation; and
- R6 improve the effectiveness of arrangements to tackle secondary school budget deficits.

What happens next?

Wrexham County Borough Council will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 70 days (50 working days) of receipt of the report. Progress in addressing the recommendations will be monitored by Estyn.

Estyn is of the opinion that the authority falls into the category of follow-up and will require an Estyn monitoring visit. The date and focus of this monitoring visit will be determined by Estyn in due course.

During all core inspections, the inspection team will consider whether the local authority needs any follow-up activity.

There are five types of follow-up activity:

1. Good practice case study
2. Link inspector monitoring
3. Estyn monitoring visit
4. Significant improvement
5. Special measures

Any follow-up inspection work will be planned in consideration of other inspection and regulatory activity within an authority. All follow-up inspections will be fed into the Local Authority Regulatory Calendar to avoid duplication and take advantage of any opportunities to work more closely with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes? Good

Standards: Good

Levels of free school meals and other deprivation measures have increased in Wrexham in the last three years. The rate of increase in free school meals has been the second highest in Wales over this time. Despite this increase, outcomes for national curriculum teacher assessments and external examinations have improved at a faster rate than Wales as a whole in both key stage 3 and key stage 4. When a range of contextual information is taken into account, the performance of pupils in Wrexham is above what might be expected in key stage 1, key stage 3 and key stage 4. It is well above for half the indicators in key stage 4. Performance in Wrexham secondary schools is good in at least two-thirds of secondary schools when compared to similar schools across Wales on the free-school-meal benchmarks.

From 2007 to 2009, Wrexham met or exceeded the majority of the Welsh Assembly Government benchmarks for performance in key stages 3 and 4, based on free-school-meal entitlement. Benchmarked information for 2010 is not yet available.

In all key stages, the gap in performance between boys and girls is similar to, or smaller than, national trends. Particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, generally attain their expected levels.

Learners make very good progress in gaining skills in first and second language Welsh and achieve good standards in both subjects. The percentage of Wrexham learners gaining qualifications in Essential Skills is improving.

Many learners make good progress to the next stage of their education, training or employment. The percentage of Wrexham learners leaving full-time education without a recognised qualification has improved since 2007 and is better than the average for Wales. The percentage of learners not in education, employment or training has improved at a faster rate than Wales and is better than the Wales average. The percentage remaining in full-time education has not improved as quickly in this time although unverified data suggests that this increased in 2010.

Few young people gain accreditation in informal and non-formal settings.

Wellbeing: Good

Standards of wellbeing are generally good. There is a good range of effective initiatives and strategies to promote participation in learning. Attendance in both primary and secondary schools is very good.

Wrexham's support programmes have a positive impact on learners' behaviour and learning. There are almost no permanent exclusions. However, the rate of fixed term exclusions is still too high.

Wrexham's student assistance programme helps learners to develop behaviours that enable them to overcome difficult experiences. These learners are able to identify when they need help and access support services more quickly because of improved counselling provision. Young people's awareness of the dangers of misusing drugs and alcohol has improved through the In2Change programme.

Because the youth service works well with partners such as the health service, young people in hospital engage effectively with project workers. These young people are less likely to self-harm or be readmitted to hospital as a result of the Inspire project.

Young people's contribution to local authority decision-making is improving as a result of the development of the Senedd Yr Ifanc. However, the Senedd is not yet fully involved in council strategic planning or in the scrutiny process. Welsh language development is under-represented within the Senedd's action plan and membership.

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

The authority has improved its processes to support and challenge schools. It sets out clear criteria in its Partnership Agreement to identify and intervene in schools causing concern. Schools generally understand these criteria well and officers have used them effectively to raise standards in a few underperforming schools.

The authority provides a good range of data analysis to its schools. Officers support school leaders and governors well to use these analyses more effectively. This has contributed to raising standards, particularly at key stages 3 and 4.

Officers provide schools with helpful written feedback after visits to schools. These notes of visit indicate areas for development. However, they often focus on provision and do not always evaluate robustly enough the quality of leadership and management in schools.

The authority has organised school effectiveness officers and those from other services into teams to work with clusters of schools. These arrangements are improving the effectiveness of the authority's support and challenge and make sure that officers from a range of services work in a more consistent and joined-up way with schools.

The authority supports a range of useful initiatives that address local and national priorities well. There are well-designed strategies to raise standards, including support for the basic skills. Support for Welsh is good. There is very good support to implement the Foundation Phase and the 14-19 Learning Pathways development has extended choice and opportunity for learners well.

Teacher assessments of the core subjects at the end of each key stage are not moderated consistently enough to make sure that they accurately reflect pupils' achievement, particularly in key stages 1 and 2.

The authority provides good training opportunities for leaders at all levels in schools.

Support for additional learning needs: Adequate

Wrexham has the highest percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need in Wales. However, the strategy to reduce the number of statements is starting to have a positive impact. As a result of good joint work with partner agencies, the authority now provides school based support for early years pupils without undertaking statutory assessment. Parents increasingly have confidence in the authority to meet their child's needs without a statement and, as a result, there have been no appeals to tribunal in the last two years and only one in the last five years.

The authority does not have an effective enough system for collating and evaluating data on the performance of pupils with additional learning needs. Schools hold good information on the progress made by individual pupils. However, officers do not have a coherent system to use this information well enough to evaluate the needs of all groups of pupils and plan provision strategically.

Officers provide a broad range of high quality training and advice to develop the skills of staff in schools. This focus on building the capacity of schools to meet pupils' learning needs is beginning to reduce referrals for additional support.

Inclusion and School Effectiveness teams do not collaborate strategically enough on how best to target resources and training in schools. This limits the authority's capacity to impact on the outcomes of all pupils with additional learning needs.

There is no agreed protocol yet that ensures that looked-after children receive an assessment of their learning needs before being placed in out of county independent schools. As a result, the authority does not always have a clear picture of whether all such pupils are making the progress they should.

There is effective and well-coordinated advice and support for parents who have English as an additional language. This is beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' outcomes.

Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing: Adequate

The authority has introduced a range of useful initiatives which support vulnerable learners well. However, officers do not evaluate outcomes enough to target provision effectively.

There is good support for those pupils whose behaviour impedes their learning. Schools and officers work well together to reduce permanent exclusion and learners receive appropriate support to return to learning after exclusion. However, these initiatives have not yet had enough impact on reducing fixed-term exclusions.

There is an effective strategy to reduce the percentage of learners not in education, employment or training. Services for young offenders offer successful interventions for both early identification and prevention of offending behaviour.

The authority has appointed a project officer to further develop services for vulnerable pupils who are educated and cared for in out-of-county independent

provision. This has improved the authority's support and care for these learners. The authority meets its statutory duties with regard to looked-after children.

Effective joint work between the pupil referral units and others enables pupils to experience a good range of options at college and with local employers. The authority does not yet have a clear strategic plan for the future of these units, including the key stage 4 pupil referral unit.

Targeted provision has improved young people's access to youth support services such as counselling, information provision, support for substance abuse and relationship support. However, progress in mapping provision and costs is too slow. Young people do not have enough opportunities to gain qualifications in non-formal and informal settings.

The local authority has appropriate policies and procedures for safeguarding.

Access and school places: Adequate

There is a good range of early years provision. The authority monitors provision regularly and provides effective support to secure ongoing improvements in quality. The authority consults appropriately on admissions to schools and co-ordinates procedures effectively. Schools and parents are clear about these arrangements and the authority meets nearly all parental preferences.

Since 2005, the authority's Primary Schools Review has delivered a range of projects which have improved the quality of school buildings. There are sound projects to improve facilities at three secondary schools. The authority has made good progress in reducing the number of surplus places in the primary sector. However, progress in the secondary sector is currently too slow and, as a result, surplus places in secondary schools are the second highest of all Welsh authorities.

The authority has recently appropriately realigned its plans for school organisation and modernisation. A series of area reviews is planned and this will identify options for reorganisation projects, although detailed plans are at an early stage. The authority has appropriate data on the condition and suitability of its school buildings.

The local authority has appropriately considered its post-16 transformation plan to address small uneconomic sixth-form provision in a few schools. Officers strongly recommended an option for full tertiary provision at the further education college. Elected members chose a different option based on a sixth-form consortium. The authority has not yet addressed inefficiencies in sixth-form provision identified in a previous Estyn inspection of 14-19 provision.

Access to youth support services and to young people's entitlements is satisfactory. Current work gives a good foundation for improvement. However, the authority and the Children and Young People's Partnership do not yet have enough information on provision to help them evaluate how well the services meet the needs of young people.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management? Adequate

Leadership: Adequate

Elected members and senior officers of the authority have good working relationships. Members show a strong commitment to education services to children and young people. They are appropriately involved in all the key statutory partnerships.

Links between plans at various levels are not always clear enough to help officers in their work to drive service improvements. The authority's vision for its education services is not stated as clearly as it could be in some key plans. For example, references in the Community Strategy, the Council Plan and the current Children and Young People's plan are too broad. However, the proposed joint Children and Young People's and Health, Social Care and Wellbeing plan provides a strong focus for delivering the authority's and partners' priorities. In addition, the new structure of the Children and Young People Service gives clear reporting lines and accountabilities.

Elected members have taken difficult decisions, such as the revised transport policy which seeks to remove inequalities and inconsistencies. However, there is more work to do on other important education policies, such as reducing surplus places and ensuring that sixth form provision offers value for money.

Senior officers have appropriately increased their challenge to school leadership teams and governing bodies on their financial performance and pupil outcomes. They are working hard to change the culture in schools and to raise aspiration levels of teachers and pupils

Scrutiny holds officers to account well. There is a need to hold portfolio members more effectively to account for the work of their service.

The Local Service Board is appropriately developing its work in line with the priorities of the Community Strategy.

Quality improvement: Adequate

There is an increasing emphasis on self-evaluation in the authority and officers and teams regularly evaluate their work. The school effectiveness service uses performance data and external challenge well to improve provision. However, the quality of evaluation is not consistent across other services and a few do not evaluate the impact of training and initiatives consistently enough.

Priorities and key tasks in the Children and Young People's plan are monitored and reviewed regularly by senior officers. However, performance reporting is rather disjointed across the authority's services and Children and Young People's Partnership. The result is that the different reporting systems do not provide an overall picture of progress against council and partnership priorities. The authority was very late in providing a self-evaluation report to Estyn.

The authority has a useful participation strategy for stakeholders. There are many good examples of interventions arising from effective consultation with the community and stakeholders. For example, consultation with head teachers identified the need for better support for parents. This project improved the attendance of primary school pupils in the priority areas.

The performance review and career development appraisal system for staff ensures that individual objectives link well to operational and strategic priorities. The authority has made appropriate progress in meeting recommendations from previous inspections including improving standards of attainment at key stage 4. However, progress has been too slow in a few areas. For example, a recommendation to identify priorities and costs for youth support services in the Partnership Plan has not been completed.

The authority is involved in a wide range of networks and partnerships that share good practice including the North Wales regional partnership.

Partnership working: Adequate

Wrexham Children and Young People's service engages well in a wide range of partnership work. It contributes positively to existing internal and external partnerships.

There are good examples of developing partnerships across authorities and other agencies in North Wales. These have a strong focus on collaboration for service delivery to increase capacity and improve efficiency. They include the North Wales Regional Partnership Board and the proposed joint Local Children's Safeguarding Board between Wrexham and a neighbouring authority. Work is progressing well, but detailed plans and targets have yet to be agreed.

The Children and Young People's Partnership Plan is, appropriately, the driver for achieving improvements in services and outcomes for learners. The Partnership has undertaken a review of the current plan and has used that well to develop a more focused draft plan for 2011-2014. This draft plan brings together the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing strategy and the Children and Young People's Plan for the first time. The Partnership is also actively developing ways to improve the planning and measurement of outcomes for learners.

The Partnership has been slow in identifying resource implications since the last inspection, and these are not included in the draft joint plan. There are plans to include further details following consultation on the plan.

Performance monitoring, reporting and planning for improvement are not always consistent. There is not a clearly understood system of monitoring and reporting to give the authority and the Partnership an effective overview of progress and impact of services.

Resource management: Adequate

Wrexham has a policy of supporting schools' budgets well. As a result, education spending is close to average despite overall authority resources being low. The authority appropriately prioritises school modernisation in capital programmes and has protected schools from efficiency savings.

Financial management is generally good. There is regular monitoring of budget positions and early annual financial planning. Schools and elected members engage in the process well.

The Council has agreed the 'Better Education and Skills for Employment' project as one of its priorities. It has identified a small amount of funding for this. However, the project has too narrow a focus and the authority has not currently identified other aspects of education services in its main priorities.

The authority is effective in obtaining external funding. However, this has led a few aspects of services to be too dependent on grants that may be withdrawn.

The authority has successfully encouraged primary schools to reduce high budget surpluses. However, the special school and six of the nine secondary schools have deficit balances. The authority has put clear procedures in place to increase its monitoring and challenge to schools.

The overall value for money of education services is adequate. The authority's spending on secondary schools is well above average whilst spending on primary schools is below average. The authority has not sufficiently evaluated the effectiveness of its use of resources to make sure it achieves best value. However, there are examples where there has been good evaluation of the value for money.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

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