

Mr Paul Orders
Chief Executive
Cardiff County Council
County Hall
Atlantic Wharf
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CF10 4UW

28 March 2014

Dear Mr Orders

Estyn monitoring visit, 10-14 February 2014

Following the outcome of the inspection of education services for children and young people in January 2011, the authority was identified as requiring an Estyn monitoring visit as follow-up to the inspection.

A monitoring visit took place on 25-29 June 2012. The outcome of that visit was recorded in a letter to the then chief executive. The letter noted that Cardiff County Council had largely addressed Recommendation 1 from the inspection and partly addressed the other five recommendations. An additional recommendation was set out in the letter in relation to school improvement services. The letter concluded:

As a result of these findings, the authority will remain in the follow-up category of Estyn monitoring. A team of HMI will return in not less than six months to monitor the further progress made. If, at that time, the authority has not made enough progress, inspectors will consider whether the authority is in need of significant improvement.

A second monitoring visit took place from 10-14 February 2014 and this letter records the outcomes of that visit. This letter is published on the Estyn website.

Mr Mark Campion HMI led a team of seven inspectors on this second visit to review the progress made against the recommendations arising from the inspection and first monitoring visit.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers, school governors and partnership representatives. The team scrutinised documentation including evidence on the progress made against each of the recommendations from the inspection and first monitoring visit. They also considered outcomes from all Estyn inspections of schools in the authority undertaken since the first monitoring visit. The team also

liaised with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to the leader of the council, cabinet member for education, chief executive and director for education.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Prior to the first monitoring visit there had been a number of significant changes to the senior leadership of Cardiff County Council. Since the first monitoring visit there have been several further changes. There has been significant turnover in senior management posts, with periods where key posts were unfilled.

The current director for education and lifelong learning took up his post in August 2013. He has clarified the relationship between the authority and its schools and has taken action to challenge schools more robustly. He is working closely with the regional school improvement service to improve the quality of monitoring, challenge, support and intervention for schools in Cardiff. He has also led the development of a new Education Development Plan for implementation from January 2014.

The current chief executive took up his post in December 2013. He has a sound understanding of the areas for improvement in Cardiff's education services for children and young people and is committed to accelerating action to address concerns. He is currently overseeing an appropriate revision to the corporate plan.

However, the assistant director of education post remains vacant and the Head of School Improvement post is currently filled on an interim basis.

It is three years since the authority was inspected and 20 months since the first monitoring visit. Most outcomes for children and young people have not improved well enough during this period, and not enough progress has been made in many areas for improvement in provision and leadership and management. Therefore, Cardiff County Council is judged to have made insufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the core inspection in January 2011 and the monitoring visit in June 2012.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is increasing the level of follow-up activity. Even taking into account the purposeful leadership of the Cabinet Member and the more robust action that has been taken in recent months by new senior managers, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this local authority is in need of significant improvement.

Progress on the recommendations outlined in the inspection report in 2011

Recommendation 1: Improve the strategic leadership of joint working between the authority and the Children's and Young People's Partnership

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

In the original inspection of 2011 partnership working was judged to be adequate. This was in part because the work of the children and young people's partnership was not effective in improving in services and outcomes for learners, and also

because the progress in developing more integrated services through joint work with partners in education, children's social services and health services was too slow.

In the monitoring visit of 2012 it was judged that the authority had made good progress in moving this work forward into the strategic context of developing a single planning process for the Cardiff Partnership Board. At that time, this work was still in development and it was judged that the recommendation had been largely met.

Since then changes of officers at a senior level have impacted on the continuity and pace of change to improve the joint strategic engagement of education services with the wider partnership arrangements emerging through the Cardiff Partnership Board. The administration has now recruited a director of education and lifelong learning, who commenced his role in August 2013. The post of assistant director remains vacant and the recruitment is on-going. Corporately, the new chief executive took up post in December 2013.

Throughout this time the Cabinet Member for Education and Life Long Learning has ensured that the focus of improvement has been maintained appropriately. Her wide-ranging knowledge and understanding of the issues affecting education have been crucial to the authority maintaining a strong focus on improvement. Together with the new director, their work has ensured that education services receive a consistent message about the improvements needed in Cardiff.

The Cardiff Partnership Board, with the support of senior officers, has made significant progress in developing partnership arrangements for children and young people. It has set clear strategic direction for the services that support and enable children and young people to enter into, remain in and progress in their education, employment and training well. The Board has successfully integrated priorities for children and young people that were previously located within the health, social care and well-being plan, the community safety plan and the children and young people's partnership plan, along with the authority's community plan, to produce the over-arching strategic plan titled 'What Matters'.

The priorities in the 'What Matters' plan link clearly to the current corporate plan, and are underpinned well with clear action plans for the six local neighbourhood management boards. The neighbourhood management boards successfully engage important partners such as service providers, residents and elected members in the planning and delivery of agreed objectives to meet local priority needs of children and young people.

A re-focused Family & Young People's Board and the Education Development Board work alongside the local neighbourhood management boards. These partnership arrangements and engagement with schools are beginning to improve.

The Education Development Plan for January 2014 to September 2016 provides clear and prioritised objectives but, as it is a new plan, the authority is not yet able to demonstrate how successfully this will influence the strategic planning of priorities for children and young people.

Recommendation 2: Improve the effectiveness of partnership planning for outcomes in priority areas

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

The Cardiff Partnership Board has established constructive partnerships and implemented a range of useful strategies that focus appropriately on tackling key priorities to improve attendance, reduce exclusions and increase the numbers of young people who are engaged in education, employment or training. For example, the Youth Engagement Group has co-ordinated the work of a variety of stakeholders in planning joint approaches and initiatives to meet these identified priorities, and the local neighbourhood structure is providing a useful vehicle for delivering better outcomes. These approaches are beginning to have a positive impact on each of these areas.

The authority has delegated funding and worked effectively with schools to establish a five step framework for managing attendance that defines clearly the relative roles and responsibilities of schools and central services. This strategy involves closer liaison between secondary schools and their partner primary schools. It sets out a graduated range of actions initially through appropriate school-based interventions but increasingly through focused support from, and referral to, the Education Welfare Service. These actions have contributed to a significant improvement in attendance.

The authority is working better with schools to help them manage behaviour and exclusions more effectively. It has introduced an appropriate five stage approach that sets out clearly the responsibilities of the school and the local authority in keeping pupils in education. These approaches are helping to improve behaviour and contributing to a reduction in the rate of exclusions. However, fixed-term exclusions rates are still too high.

In the last three years for which verified data is available, Cardiff has had the highest proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training at 16 in Wales. A wide range of partners are working together to reduce the numbers of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not engaged in education, employment or training. This is based on a multi-agency approach with significant input, for example, from local business partners and further education institutions, Job Centre Plus, the Youth Service, Communities First and Families First. There has been greater emphasis on the early identification of young people who are most at risk of not engaging in education or training, particularly through the use of the Vulnerability Assessment Profile¹. The partnership with Careers Wales is helping to improve the tracking of pupils and sharing of data. There has also been better allocation and co-ordination of support and emphasis on providing suitable intervention programmes through the work of a significant responsible adult. These strategies are contributing to an improvement in the proportion of young people who remain in education, employment or training.

Through the Education Development Board, the authority is beginning to establish closer partnerships with higher education and the business and enterprise

¹ The Vulnerability Assessment Profile uses a range of information to provide a detailed individual profile for young people that helps agencies to assess their vulnerability and determine the necessary levels of intervention across all services.

community, for example to broaden educational and employment opportunities for post-16 students. It is too early to evaluate the impact of these new partnerships.

In recent months, the authority has worked closely with its partners in the regional consortium school improvement service. The cabinet member for education and senior officers have engaged in robust dialogue to improve governance arrangements with the regional consortium and influence the work of its school improvement service. This is helping to ensure that the service is more appropriately configured and managed to meet the needs of the authority and its schools.

Despite the developing partnerships through the Cardiff partnership board and the regional consortium school improvement service, the work since the inspection and first monitoring visit has not demonstrated enough impact on raising standards for all children and young people.

Recommendation 3: Improve the scrutiny of partnership working

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

In the original inspection of 2011 leadership was judged to be adequate. At that time the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee was developing its role well to focus more on monitoring learner outcomes. However, it did not consistently scrutinise wider partnership provision outside of the statutory service and officers were not able to present a strategic overview of provision between the authority and the Children and Young People's Partnership.

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has continued to scrutinise and challenge education services. The committee's remit now includes scrutiny of the authority's improvement plan and of the wider services to support children and young people delivered through the partnership arrangements of the Cardiff Partnership Board.

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee receives reports that include a wide range of relevant data. The recent annual performance report contains a useful initial summary for the committee. The report also includes data about the performance of individual schools and this transparency is helpful. However, the analysis of the data provided is not always clear enough to help the committee to make informed decisions.

At the time of the first monitoring visit in 2012 the authority had established a multi-agency panel to improve the scrutiny of partnership work, which was in the early stages of developing its programme of work. That multi-agency scrutiny panel for the Cardiff Partnership Board has continued to develop its role. It engages partner organisations well in the scrutiny of partnership activities. The panel scrutinises a wide range of support services for children and young people. These include learner, family and community engagement, geographical services, business intelligence and partnership priorities.

However, there is not enough clarity about the relationship between the redefined wider role of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee which includes partnership activities, and the role of the Cardiff Partnership Scrutiny Panel. This

means that elected members do not have a good enough strategic overview and understanding of the performance of services for children and young people across education within the authority and the Cardiff Partnership Board.

Recommendation 4: Continue to raise standards at key stage 4, improve attendance, reduce exclusions and reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

There has not been enough progress in standards in schools since the inspection in 2011 and the monitoring visit in 2012. The letter from the first monitoring visit noted concerns about primary school performance in addition to those about secondary schools.

When schools in Cardiff are compared to similar schools, using the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals, performance in 2013 is slightly below average in the Foundation Phase and key stage 2. For the Foundation Phase Indicator and the Core Subject Indicator at key stage 2, too few schools are in the top 25% of schools.

When schools in Cardiff are compared to similar schools, performance in key stage 3 has remained above average. However, performance at key stage 4 has weakened over the last 3 years. Raw performance is higher in 2013 for four of the five main indicators compared to 2011. However, Wales has improved at a faster rate than Cardiff during this period.

In 2013, many schools in Cardiff are in the bottom 50% of schools for all five main indicators at key stage 4 and only a few schools are in the top 25%. For the Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics, three-quarters of schools are in the bottom 50%. Only two schools are in a higher quarter for this indicator than they were in 2011 whereas seven schools are in a lower quarter. For the Level 1 indicator, very few schools are in the top 25% and almost half of schools are in the bottom 25%. The proportion of pupils leaving school without a formal qualification does not compare well with other local authorities.

The Welsh Government sets benchmarks for performance based on free-school-meal entitlement. In 2013, Cardiff exceeded the benchmark for the Core Subject Indicator at key stage 3, met the benchmark for the Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics, but did not meet the benchmark for the average capped wider points score at key stage 4.

For all 5 main indicators at key stage 4 in 2013, pupils eligible for free school meals in Cardiff perform more worse than those across Wales. The gap in performance between pupils eligible for free school meals and those not eligible is bigger in Cardiff than in Wales.

For all the main indicators except the Level 1 threshold at key stage 4 in 2013, the gap in performance between girls and boys is slightly smaller in Cardiff than the Wales average. However, this is because of the relatively weak performance of girls in Cardiff.

Between 2011 and 2013, there was a steady improvement in primary school attendance and a significant improvement in secondary school attendance. Over this period, Cardiff's ranking position out of 22 local authorities in Wales improved from 16th to 11th for primary school attendance and from 21st to 9th for secondary school attendance. In 2012-2013 almost half of secondary schools were in the top quarter when compared with similar schools on the free school meals benchmark and about two-thirds were in the top half. Unverified data provided by the local authority suggests that there has been further improvement in attendance in both primary and secondary schools during the current academic year.

There has been a marked reduction in the rate of fixed-term exclusions in secondary schools. In spite of this, the rate of fixed-term exclusions remains too high and has been second-highest in Wales for the last three years, although the average number of days lost from school per fixed-term exclusion has reduced and is marginally better than the Wales average.

There has been a steady improvement in the proportion of young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training at age 16. However, Cardiff continues to be the worst performing authority in Wales. Unverified data for 2012-2013 provided by the authority suggests a further improvement in these figures.

Recommendation 5: Improve performance management processes to ensure a consistent approach in delivering objectives

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Performance management processes have not been robust enough to ensure there has been suitable progress in meeting the authority's objectives. This is evident through the wide variations in performance in the authority's schools and the relatively high proportion of schools judged to be in need of follow-up activity. The authority gathers a wide range of data to track progress with specific initiatives. However, it has not consistently analysed and evaluated this information robustly enough to measure progress accurately, identify those key areas that require improvement and to target initiatives effectively.

A recent Welsh Local Government Association peer review, commissioned by the Council, identified the need to create a 'performance culture' and stated that the education directorate's 'self-evaluation, action plan and scrutiny arrangements generally are ineffective'. The Council accepted these findings of the peer review.

Following the peer review, there has been a corporate commitment to strengthening the culture and improving performance management processes. There is an expectation that the management of service areas needs to improve and that there should be regular and robust performance discussions and formal reviews of the performance of individual officers against specific objectives. This is beginning to take place. Individual performance objectives are aligned more clearly with service plan and work-stream priorities.

The authority has improved its processes for monitoring, reporting and evaluating progress. The most recent report by the director of education and lifelong learning provides a detailed and realistic analysis of the performance of schools and the youth

service in Cardiff in 2012-2013. The report identifies certain areas where performance is not good enough and progress has been too slow. It includes transparent information about the performance of all primary and secondary schools indicating wide variations in the performance of schools with similar levels of deprivation. However, the report does not highlight the key issues that need to be addressed clearly enough.

The Education Development Plan for January 2014 to September 2016 is aligned well to the 'What Matters' strategy and corporate plan. It sets out its priorities and strategies clearly and focuses on delivering a reduced number of key performance indicators. This is helping to define more precisely the improvement agenda. Service business plans are being developed to address the specific priorities within the Education Development Plan.

Recommendation 6: Improve the information, advice and support for all parents of learners requiring the statutory assessment of pupils' special educational needs

This recommendation has been fully addressed.

The additional learning needs and inclusion service of the authority has introduced a range of effective measures to improve the information, advice and support for parents of pupils going through statutory assessment process. It has extended this advice and support to parents of all pupils with additional learning needs. The authority has co-ordinated its work effectively to improve this area of its work and address this recommendation.

An important feature in the authority's success is the enhanced role of the casework team. The authority has developed the skills and expertise of the casework team through sensitive training and awareness-raising. This team now provides a good service to parents. In addition, the team liaises effectively and provides good support to schools. This ensures that, generally, schools receive relevant information about pupils' needs in a timely manner. This helps schools plan suitable provision and ensure support is appropriate to pupils' needs.

The authority has also developed a better partnership with the Special Needs Advisory Project (SNAP), and this has had a positive impact on how the authority works with parents. Officers of SNAP are now members of the case advisory panel that allocates additional resource to schools. This work enables SNAP to share its expertise in working with parents with other members of the panel. Because of this, the authority is developing its understanding of parents' needs. This work also helps SNAP understand the issues the authority must consider in deciding on how best to allocate resources. Officers of SNAP now have up to date information that they share with the parents of the individual pupils discussed. As a result, parents understand the authority's plans for their child and fewer parents now appeal to the special needs tribunal.

The authority has improved its documentation for parents about additional learning needs. Information to guide and advise parents is more easily available on the authority's website.

The authority has established a good system of support groups for parents to meet together to share their experiences and discuss concerns. A range of professionals from relevant agencies and voluntary organisations support these groups. Parents at these groups can now benefit from advice about statutory processes. They can also access training opportunities on a range of issues including managing children's behaviour and supporting the development of communication skills.

Progress against the additional recommendation outlined in the letter for the monitoring visit in 2012

Recommendation: Make sure that the arrangements for delivering school improvement services challenge and support all schools effectively, in order to improve standards for learners in all key stages

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

The authority has recently improved its processes to support, challenge and intervene in schools. There is an increasingly strong culture of challenge, led by the cabinet member for education and lifelong learning and the recently appointed director of education. Officers are starting to tackle underperformance more robustly. However, these improved arrangements to identify and intervene in underperforming schools are relatively recent and have not yet had time to make enough impact on standards of attainment in schools.

Senior officers and key elected members understand well the challenges facing the education service and acknowledge the need to address underperformance in schools. The director of education and the cabinet member for education and lifelong learning have engaged well with headteachers and undertaken a programme of school visits. Schools identified for intensive support have support plans and their progress is robustly challenged by the director and senior officers. Senior officers from the local authority work increasingly closely with those from the regional school improvement service to make sure there is a consistent focus on raising standards.

System leaders from the regional school improvement service are given clear guidance to support them in challenging schools. However, individual system leaders are not consistent in their use of this guidance. Processes to quality assure the work of system leaders have been strengthened. However, these are not yet secure enough to make sure that all officers bring a rigorous challenge to schools. As a result, although the authority has examples where regional officers and its own officers identify underperforming schools accurately and intervene effectively, in other schools underperformance is not recognised quickly enough. Since the monitoring visit in 2012 two primary schools and three secondary schools have been identified as requiring significant improvement or special measures following an Estyn inspection. In addition, a primary school in need of significant improvement did not improve quickly enough and was identified as requiring special measures.

System leaders use the regional consortium's support and challenge framework to classify schools according to risk and to plan appropriate interventions. System leaders, local authority officers and schools use a good range of data analysis to contribute to this categorisation. Headteachers and governing bodies understand well the category their school is in although a minority are less clear exactly how this

is derived or the support they will receive as a result. Senior officers have reviewed the use of this framework and provided guidance to improve its use. However there is still too much variation in how officers apply criteria and the link between the category of school and the performance of its pupils is not always clear. Officers have improved their use of data to challenge schools but do not always use data accurately enough to target exactly where there is underperformance.

Officers provide annual performance reports for schools covering aspects of leadership, provision and standards of attainment. These reports are mainly evaluative and generally identify areas for improvement as well as strengths. A few contain a helpful analysis of the quality of the school leadership. However, not all contain clear enough messages for schools to know how to improve and, in too many, shortcomings in leadership and management are not clearly explained.

Officers also provide written records of visits to schools. However, many are descriptive and agreed actions are vague without sufficient focus on their impact on teaching and learning. Reports do not give schools a clear enough indication of the way forward, nor challenge all schools to improve.

Schools' annual performance reviews are sent to the governing body. System leaders usefully attend governing body meetings to present the main messages from these reports. However a few governors remain unclear about the areas for improvement in their schools.

Other areas for improvement

The letter from the first monitoring visit noted that 'the authority's improvement planning for pupils with additional learning needs' was 'not always strategic enough'. Since the last visit, the authority has taken action to improve its strategic approach to the management of its additional learning needs services. A recent document, 'Excellent Practice in Managing Inclusion', usefully sets out the role of the authority and the expectations of schools in managing provision for pupils with additional learning needs. However there is still confusion amongst headteachers about aspects of additional needs provision. For example, not all headteachers of specialist resource bases and special schools are clear about admission criteria.

In a range of interviews, concerns about equitable support for Welsh medium schools were raised. These concerns initially arose in response to questions about support for pupils with additional learning needs. However, headteachers and governors were clear that it is not a problem specifically for additional learning needs services but a broader, more general concern that the support services for Welsh medium schools have not developed quickly enough alongside the increase in places in these schools. Your link inspectors will explore these concerns with you as part of their ongoing monitoring work.

Recommendations

The recommendations from the inspection in 2011 and monitoring visit in 2012 have been revised. In order to bring about the necessary improvements in a timely manner, the authority should:

- Raise standards, particularly at Key Stage 4;
- Reduce exclusions and reduce the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training post-16;
- Make sure that the arrangements for delivering school improvement services challenge and support all schools effectively, in order to improve standards for learners in all key stages;
- Improve the effectiveness of joint planning across the range of partnership working;
- Improve performance management processes to ensure a consistent approach in delivering objectives; and
- Improve the scrutiny of local authority education services and partnership working.

Next steps

The authority has 50 days to prepare an action plan. This action plan needs to outline the steps the authority will take to implement the necessary improvements. The plan needs to clearly identify who will take responsibility for tasks, contain milestones, and identify relevant resources and how success will be evidenced. In addition to the recommendations given, the authority should respond to the other issues noted in this letter.

Your Estyn link inspectors, Huw Davies HMI and Sarah Lewis HMI, will agree with you a plan for future monitoring.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and to the Wales Audit Office for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Wales Audit Office