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Chief Executive
Torfaen County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Pontypool
NP4 6YB

22 March 2013

Dear Alison,

Estyn Monitoring Visit 18-22 February 2013

Following Estyn's inspection of Torfaen's education services for children and young people in October 2011, the authority was identified as requiring significant improvement.

In February 2013, a team of seven inspectors, led by Gerard Kerslake HMI, visited the authority to monitor the progress against the recommendations arising from the inspection in 2011 and to review progress in improving the authority's performance. This letter records the outcomes of that visit.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers and partner representatives. They scrutinised documentation including evidence on the progress made on each of the inspection recommendations. They also considered outcomes from all Estyn inspections in the authority undertaken since the original inspection in October 2011. 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 cabinet member for education, chief executive, deputy chief executive and chief education officer of the authority.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Since the inspection in October 2011, the authority has made limited progress against most of the recommendations left by the inspection team. Improvements have been slow and standards in secondary schools remain unsatisfactory.

Greater change and pace are required in order to bring about further improvement. Despite the availability of relevant information about the performance of schools and

education services, the authority still does not accurately identify underperformance, or the implications of this for learners. This means there remains a lack of open debate about shortcomings. As a consequence, the authority does not identify clearly for schools, managers and elected members the extent of the improvements required or the pace at which progress is needed.

The authority has interpreted narrowly the Estyn's recommendations in the local authority education service report from October 2011. This has meant the authority has not undertaken a sufficiently robust analysis of the underlying issues which led to its being identified as requiring significant improvement.

Following the last inspection, the authority established three improvement boards to oversee progress against the recommendations. These boards have made limited contributions to progress or improvements in standards. Frequently, group members have been too generous when evaluating progress and have not been rigorous enough when judging the impact of activities.

Since the last inspection, a higher than average proportion of Torfaen schools have been identified as needing follow-up after their inspections. At present, one primary school, one secondary school and the pupil referral unit are in need of significant improvement and one secondary school requires special measures.

The authority has not made effective use of its powers to improve underperforming schools. Since the last inspection, the quality of reports provided by local authority officers to Estyn prior to school inspections has been inconsistent. In particular, almost all reports have failed to identify issues relating to the quality of teaching and learning well enough, and have not judged the impact of poor leadership and management clearly.

In September 2012 the regional consortium took over responsibility for school improvement services. At the same time, the authority has also retained a few consultants to support teaching in core subjects. However, their work is not strategically co-ordinated well enough by the authority in partnership with the regional consortia and its school improvement service. Recent reports provided to Estyn show a better understanding of schools.

The authority remains too reliant on Estyn inspections to judge the quality of teaching and learning in most schools. Very few secondary schools have had a culture of using lesson observations to share good practice in addition to their use for performance management and this has hindered progress in improving teaching and learning.

The authority has suitable strategies in place to improve primary attendance rates. Attendance rates have increased since the last inspection and are now at around the Wales average.

In 2012, rates of fixed-term exclusions of five days or less have improved only slightly but remain much higher than the Wales average. Fixed-term exclusions of six days or more have increased. Torfaen's relative performance, when compared on the free school meal benchmark to other local authorities in Wales, has also deteriorated.

Since the previous inspection, Torfaen has made adequate progress in reducing surplus places. The local authority has issued statutory notices in order to implement proposals for the removal of 324 primary school places, and also dealt with one school with a significant surplus. The authority has agreed proposals for remodelling post-16 provision which will address surplus places in secondary schools. However, these proposals are reliant on finalising agreement with the local further education college, funding from Welsh Government and formal approval by elected members.

The inspection in October 2011 identified several areas for improvement in the provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). Since that inspection, the authority has only addressed a minority of these shortcomings. This includes securing funding for the special school outreach service and improving information for parents on the council website. However, the local authority has not prioritised the development of its underlying ALN strategy. As a consequence, improvements in the strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation of the authority's ALN services have not yet begun, although these are planned to commence later in 2013.

Progress on the recommendations in the report

Recommendation 1: Raise standards in secondary schools, particularly in key stage 4

This recommendation has not been addressed.

When the performance of Torfaen schools is compared to that of similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, in key stage 4 in 2012 it was well below average on all five of the main indicators. The authority has missed all Welsh Government benchmarks over the past four years. Despite small improvements in secondary school performance in 2012, standards overall remain unsatisfactory.

When compared to that of similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, performance on the key stage 3 core subject indicator remains well below average. In 2012, only one school was in the top quarter and nearly half of all schools were in the lowest 25%.

At key stage 4, performance is unsatisfactory on all of the five main indicators. On the level 1 threshold and the capped average points score no school is above average. On three of the five indicators more than half of schools are in the bottom 25%. On the level 2 threshold and level 2 including English or Welsh first language and mathematics there is only one school in the top 25%. On all other indicators no school is in the top 25%.

Pupils' progress on the core subject indicator and the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics is significantly below average from key stage 2 to key stage 3 and from key stage 3 to key stage 4. Overall, this means that secondary pupils in Torfaen do not progress as well as they should.

Pupils eligible for free school meals perform well below expected levels. The gap between these pupils and those not eligible for free school meals has widened over the last three years in key indicators at key stage 4.

Recommendation 2: Take action to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET)

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

From a very low base, the authority has made slow progress since the last inspection. It has established a strategic group to oversee this work, which includes an appropriate range of partners. It has also produced a NEETs strategy and action plan, which identify short and long term priorities.

In 2011, the percentage of Year 11 school leavers who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) was amongst the highest in Wales. Careers Wales' unverified data suggests that this reduced in 2012. However, all-Wales data is not yet available, and it is not therefore possible to make a comparison with other authorities.

In order to address the high percentage of Year 11 leavers who are NEET, the authority has developed a range of interventions to support individual young people at key stage 4 and those who have left school, such as 'PreVent'¹ and a Families First 'KS4 project'. However, the authority does not yet have good enough systems in place to measure the longer term impact of this work. As a result, it does not have a clear understanding of how effectively these interventions help young people to sustain their involvement in education, employment and training over time.

The authority has focused on support for key stage 4 pupils and school leavers. As a result, it has not done enough to identify pupils at risk of becoming NEET at an earlier stage of their education.

The authority has been slow to develop effective systems for collecting data on school leavers. For example, until recently, it did not have accurate enough information on those leavers who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. This means that intervention is not always timely or appropriately targeted. As a result of improved partnership working and the development of an Information Sharing Protocol, systems are now improving and data is becoming more accurate. The authority is beginning to use its data to track this group of young people better and provide more appropriate targeted intervention. However, this work is at an early stage.

Recommendation 3: Improve the quality and consistency of the evaluation of services to inform planning more effectively

This recommendation has not been addressed.

The authority's own assessment of its progress focuses too much on small improvements in the self-assessment processes, with too little critical assessment of

¹ Torfaen PreVent 14-19 is a partnership with Torfaen's education department; youth service; sports development; Coleg Gwent and other partners. It aims to support young people aged 14-19 in Torfaen to achieve their full potential.

any improvements in its use of evaluation of performance and its planning of education services. This difficulty is reflected in the education services' most recent annual self-evaluation. Although the self-evaluation report is more focused and evaluative than in previous years, it still does not focus sufficiently on the adverse impact that a few significant areas for development have on the authority's prospects for improvement.

The strategic objectives highlighted in the Corporate Plan are cascaded clearly to service level plans. This means that the authority's aspirations are set out clearly at operational levels. However, the success measures used at service level do not enable managers to demonstrate sufficiently the impact of their action on service outcomes or achievement of its priorities.

Although the authority is moving more towards the use of outcome measures to evaluate its work, the use of these is inconsistent. Where outcome-based methodologies are used by education services, performance measures and success criteria remain largely focused on the completion of tasks and activities. This means that it is difficult to hold officers to account for their performance and to monitor the impact of their work. Therefore, current planning arrangements do not enable the authority to target or evaluate service level interventions well enough.

Pupil performance data is now more easily accessible. However, the authority does not yet fully use this information intelligently or sophisticatedly enough to target better those groups of learners identified for bespoke interventions across services.

Recommendation 4: Improve the performance management of services to ensure a consistent approach in delivering improvements

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

The authority has established agreed corporate arrangements for managing the council's performance. Work has been carried out since the last inspection to develop an appropriate suite of outcome-focused indicators to support the new Single Integrated Plan. However, there are weaknesses in the accuracy of some measures and the quality of evidence used by the authority to judge improvement and impact. The authority therefore faces a continuing challenge to improve the way it reports using outcome-focused measures of success rather than using descriptions of activities undertaken.

The Learning Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee is now more effective because it focuses on fewer priorities and is more challenging to services. The committee receives a more substantial range of information regarding service and school performance. However, whilst the availability of and access to data have improved, the way this data is presented too frequently masks the true impact of the messages. This means elected members often do not understand fully the importance of the messages, and consequently members are not able to hold officers and schools to account well enough. This has been recognised as a training need for members.

The professional leadership of the authority has very recently been reviewed to create a single senior leadership team including all senior corporate and frontline service chief officers. This provides a single point of support and challenge to manage partnership practice and cross cutting themes. This means that education now has an appropriate corporate position. However, this change has yet to impact on improvements in the management of the education department.

Recommendation 5: Implement effective governance arrangements for the work of the CYPP to ensure that all services for children and young people in Torfaen are managed appropriately.

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

The partnership arrangements in Torfaen are in transition, in response to Estyn's inspection recommendations and to national changes. This transition has led to changes in partnership structures, reporting processes, and performance monitoring.

The membership of the Improving Partnership Board has been strengthened with the inclusion of senior representation from the health board and the further education college.

The partnership structure is complex and includes an oversight of operational planning and joint project work. Through this structure, the partnership is able to capture and make use of information and intelligence about young people and their needs.

The development of the draft single integrated plan and the underpinning needs analysis has identified shared key priorities for improvement, such as raising school attendance, reducing exclusions, improving learning outcomes for children and young people, and reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). These priorities can be tracked in the work of the Local Service Board (LSB), the Improving Partnership Board and into the planning of youth support services' work. However, it is more difficult to track how partners are held to account against these priorities.

In addition the partnership's priorities are based on themes, which makes it difficult for the partnership to evaluate adequately how well strategic and operational issues are addressed.

The partnership has recently introduced a performance management process but the detail of the reviews and reports too frequently confuse outcome measures and task completion. This means that actual achievement, progress and impact are hard to identify and evaluate.

The result of the recent mapping exercise to update information and knowledge about the distribution of youth support services and their work across the borough is now available to partners and the public. However, there is no detailed analysis of this information to identify important gaps in provision together with strategic proposals for any changes to the distribution of the current services.

Next steps

Overall, the team judged that the authority has made insufficient progress to address the recommendations in the inspection report. The team are of the opinion, and HMCI agrees, that special measures are required in relation to this authority. HMCI has a duty, under the Education Act 2002, to notify the Minister for Education and Skills that the authority requires special measures.

Your Estyn Link Inspectors will continue to monitor overall progress through their normal link role with the authority.

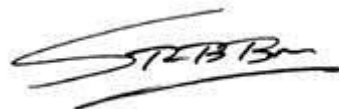
Recommendations

In order to bring about the necessary improvements in a timely manner, the authority should review its post-inspection action plan (PIAP), and increase the pace and depth of change in order to address the recommendations from the LAESCYP inspection of 2011. In particular the authority should:

- make sure that the arrangements for delivering school improvement services challenge and support all schools effectively, in order to improve quickly standards for all learners and those in secondary schools in particular; and
- improve the use of outcome measures for self-evaluation and reporting by the education service, and partnership bodies in order to plan services better, to monitor performance more accurately, and to hold individual services more to account.

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

Yours sincerely



Simon R Brown
Strategic Director

c.c.
Steve Vincent. Welsh Government
Alan Morris. Wales Audit Office