



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



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE  

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SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

**A report on**

**Powys County Council  
County Hall  
Llandrindod Wells  
Powys  
LD1 5LG**

**Date of inspection: July 2019**

**by**

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

## About Powys County Council

Powys County Council is a large, rural county in mid-Wales with a population of 132,515. It covers a quarter of the area of Wales and is one of the largest yet least populated counties in England and Wales.

The local authority maintains 95 schools. The authority has one all-through school for pupils aged 3 to 16. There are 80 primary schools, including 21 that provide Welsh-medium education. There are 11 secondary schools, none of which are categorised as Welsh-medium schools. Six of these secondary schools are dual stream language schools. In addition, there are three special schools and a pupil referral unit.

The Chief Executive took up her post in February 2019 and the Head of Education was appointed in September 2018. The Leader of the Council has been in the role since May 2017 and the elected member with the cabinet lead role for education services has held the role since May 2017. The local authority's last inspection was in March 2011.

Powys is one of six local authorities in the ERW Consortium region, which provides the school improvement services for the local authority.

In 2019-2020, the Council's net education budget is approximately £95 million. The delegated school budget per pupil is £4,945 per pupil, which is 9<sup>th</sup> highest of all local authorities in Wales. The average per pupil schools budget in Wales is £4,776 per pupil.

Inspectors take account of a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating outcomes and the quality of education services. They consider this information alongside information about the national population. Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Powys is noted below:

- Over a three year average, 11 % of pupils aged five to fifteen are eligible for free school meals, which is lower than the Wales average of 17.9%
- 12 % of pupils aged five and over are fluent in Welsh, which is lower than the Wales average of 16.2%
- 3.2 % of pupils are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 11.0%
- 19.6 % of pupils have special educational needs, lower than the Wales average of 22.6%
- 97 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2018, which is lower than the Wales average of 102 children per 10,000

## Summary

Senior leaders have a clear vision about how to improve education services in Powys. Both the Cabinet and the learning and skills scrutiny committee, along with senior officers, are beginning to improve the rigour and the level of scrutiny and challenge across all services. However, this is yet to have sufficient impact on key issues within education services that the authority has found hard to improve over a number of years. Many of these issues are areas of significant concern. Although senior leaders have a broad understanding of the strengths and areas for development in education, self-evaluation processes and improvement planning are weak. As a result, progress is generally slow.

Overall, many pupils in Powys schools make sound progress. However, in many secondary schools, pupils do not sustain the good progress they achieve in early years settings and primary schools. In particular, the performance of more able pupils is too inconsistent across secondary schools. A few secondary schools perform strongly whilst performance in many others is weak.

Overall, the local authority knows its schools well and has generally strengthened how it challenges the performance of schools and supports them to improve. For example, the Team Around the School approach is a useful way for schools to gain suitable support and challenge from the local authority and its challenge advisers. There are recent worthwhile initiatives to improve the support for school leaders, such as through mentoring of new headteachers and the recent use of 'champion' governors.

However, there are many areas of the authority's work causing significant concern, such as those relating to school organisation, financial management, school governance, lack of action regarding schools causing concern and the co-ordination of provision for pupils with special educational needs or who may require extra support. These issues affect school leadership, staffing structures, curriculum planning and staff morale, which in turn limit the impact of challenge advisers and other school improvement staff.

## Recommendations

- R1 Improve standards in secondary schools, and especially the performance of more able learners
- R2 Improve the evaluation, planning and coordination of provision for learners with special educational needs and other pupils who may require extra support
- R3 Improve the consistency and impact of senior leaders in improving the quality of education services and continue to strengthen the rigour, scrutiny and challenge about performance of the authority's services
- R4 Ensure that the organisation of provision for non-maintained, post16; Welsh-medium education and secondary education meets the needs of the children and young people of Powys
- R5 Continue to improve the quality of financial management in schools and take appropriate action to address schools with significant deficit budgets

## What happens next

Powys local government education services are causing significant concern and require follow-up activity. The local authority will update its improvement plans to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will review the authority's progress through a post-inspection improvement conference and progress conferences. A monitoring visit will take place after the last progress conference to consider how well the local authority has addressed each of the recommendations and how much progress has been made overall.

## Main findings

### Outcomes

In Powys, inspection outcomes indicate that pupils generally make sound progress over their time in statutory education. However, in many secondary schools, pupils do not sustain the good progress they achieve in early years settings and primary schools. The performance of pupils in important indicators that consider a range of qualifications, such as the capped points score and the proportion of pupils achieving five A\*-A grades, has varied considerably across secondary schools.

The sample of secondary schools inspected during the last three years is small and therefore it is difficult to draw meaningful comparisons of inspection outcomes. However, the time taken for secondary schools to be removed from statutory categories is comparatively long. In addition, once removed from a statutory category, secondary schools do not generally sustain progress.

Outcomes from Estyn inspection reports in non-maintained settings and schools show that most pupils' wellbeing is good. Pupils' attendance in primary schools is good and compares well to levels in similar local authorities. Although pupils' attendance in secondary schools compares favourably with levels in Wales and similar local authorities, almost half of secondary schools have been in the bottom 25% when compared to similar schools over the past two years.

Vulnerable learners, including pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with special educational needs, broadly perform in line with the average for their peers across Wales.

The rate of permanent exclusions from secondary schools is high when compared with levels in similar local authorities. The total number of fixed-term exclusions of five days or less has varied over the past four years, and although it has reduced between 2017 and 2018, it remains too high.

Pupils benefit from valuable opportunities to keep active and healthy. In non-maintained settings, local authority initiatives have been successful in increasing the opportunities for children to learn through active play. In primary and secondary schools, pupils benefit from the wide range of physical activities promoted through the young ambassador scheme. Pupils who are young ambassadors take responsibility for the regular evaluation of the range of activities available in their schools, with support from local authority sports officers. They use this information well to improve provision and take responsibility for leading these activities on a regular basis. Local authority evaluations show that these activities have a positive effect on the amount of physical activity pupils undertake in schools, and develop the social and leadership skills of the young ambassadors successfully.

The local authority has a broad range of strategies to support pupils to improve their mental and emotional health. The local authority's analysis of the online counselling service, which also includes out-of-school support and advice, shows that pupils with issues such as depression, anxiety and self-harm have benefited from the support.

However, overall there is no clear strategic approach for developing pupils' mental and emotional health across the local authority.

Over the last three years, the proportion of Year 11 leavers known not to be in education, employment or training (NEET) has remained low and has continued to reduce at a similar rate to the Wales average. Young people benefit from effective bespoke support from the youth service in order to deal with their individual needs.

There are useful opportunities for pupils to share their views as part of the Powys Youth Forum and 'have your say days', but there is limited evidence of how officers use this information to inform improvements or evaluate any initiatives implemented. Generally, pupils' contributions to the strategic direction of education issues of the local authority are underdeveloped.

### **Education services**

Under Inspection Area 2, Estyn sets local inspection questions that are relevant to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's current strategic priorities or result from information that Estyn has about education services in the local authority.

#### **How well does the local authority challenge the performance of schools and support them to improve?**

Overall, the local authority knows its schools well. A few schools had important issues highlighted during inspections over the last three years of which the local authority was not sufficiently aware. The authority reviewed why this had happened and took suitable action to build the capacity of its challenge adviser team and tighten the quality assurance of their work. For example, the local authority recently added capacity to its challenge adviser team to provide suitable challenge and support to special schools. During the last year, all inspections have shown that the local authority was aware of the school's main strengths and areas for improvement.

The local authority's team of challenge advisers provide helpful challenge and support to schools. They work well with schools to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Challenge advisers agree suitable support for schools to help address areas for improvement, drawing appropriately from local authority staff, staff working for the regional school improvement service (ERW) and senior leaders from schools to provide this support. This challenge and support have contributed to improvements in provision and leadership in schools and outcomes for learners. The proportion of schools identified as requiring significant support has reduced from around half of schools in 2015 to around a quarter of schools currently.

In recent years, challenge advisers have improved their knowledge of excellent practice in schools. They are sharing this well, and developing a culture of school-to-school support across schools, particularly primary schools.

Local authority officers have improved how they share information about individual schools. Over the last two years, useful Team Around the School meetings in particular have helped to ensure that challenge advisers and service managers are all aware of important issues such as school performance, safeguarding, school governance, complaints, school finances, school organisation and human resources. This has helped challenge advisers to consider relevant issues when challenging schools and agreeing support.

The local authority has constructive systems in place to monitor schools identified as causing concern. This includes regular school improvement boards for the schools causing the greatest concern, involving senior officers from the local authority, school senior leaders and others involved in supporting the school. Since 2018, the local authority has issued suitable warning notices to a very few schools causing significant concern. However, the local authority has been slow to address issues in schools that have failed to meet the requirements of a warning notice.

Since the last inspection, the challenge and support provided to primary schools has had more impact than that provided to secondary schools or special schools. This is largely for two reasons. Firstly, there have been historical weaknesses in the authority's capacity to challenge and support secondary schools and special schools, which have generally been addressed over the last two years. Secondly, there have been longstanding weaknesses in strategic leadership of senior officers and elected members in the local authority. In particular, there are weaknesses relating to school organisation, financial management, school governance, lack of action regarding schools causing concern and coordination of provision for pupils with additional learning needs. These issues affect school leadership, staffing structures, curriculum planning and staff morale, which in turn limit the impact that challenge advisers and other school improvement staff have.

### **How effectively does the local authority promote strong leadership in its schools?**

Challenge advisers support school leaders well, particularly in primary schools. They identify leaders with specific strengths, for example in school evaluation processes, and use these leaders to support other schools where these processes are weaker. They support the performance management of senior leaders appropriately and, for example, promote a better link between the objectives set for headteachers and the school's improvement priorities.

Overall, there has been a reduction in the number of schools that require monitoring following an inspection by Estyn. Since the authority's last inspection, judgements for the quality of leadership in primary schools have compared well, or better than the national average. However, judgements about leadership in secondary schools are weaker, with more adequate and unsatisfactory judgements compared to the national average.

Over time, the local authority has had difficulties recruiting suitable headteachers, particularly for its secondary schools. As a result, a few primary schools and a minority of secondary schools are without permanent headteachers. Challenge advisers recognise the need to identify potential leaders and to support these individuals as they progress through their careers. The local authority is beginning to see the impact of this work, for example with teachers who have worked in local schools taking on senior leadership roles. There are a number of new headteachers in both primary and secondary schools. Officers ensure that all new and acting headteachers have support from an experienced mentor headteacher.

The local authority's human resource and finance teams provide schools with valuable support, including when the performance of teachers or leaders cause concern. In response to the growing number of schools that are federated, officers have developed helpful guidance to support school leaders through this process. This includes examples of successful practice in leading more than one school.

The local authority provides worthwhile opportunities for school staff to develop leadership skills, including through programmes offered jointly with the regional school improvement service. Challenge advisers encourage school staff at all levels to engage in leadership programmes. Officers recognised the need for a greater focus on improving the skills of middle leaders, particularly in secondary schools and, as a result, the number of teachers participating in programmes for middle leaders increased in 2018-2019. The local authority employs a small team of trainers to provide opportunities locally for teaching assistants to achieve the status of higher level teaching assistant.

Since September 2018, the leadership team of the regional school improvement service has worked with identified secondary schools to provide more bespoke support to leadership teams. Members of the secondary improvement team with recent school leadership experience link to the secondary schools requiring support, for example to develop the skills of middle leaders. Staff from the schools supported through this work have opportunities to visit other schools in order to improve their skills. Although this work is relatively new, there is evidence that it is beginning to have a positive impact on teachers in the identified schools. For example, this work is improving their skills in analysing pupil performance data and in monitoring and evaluating the work of their teams.

The governor support unit provides training and development opportunities on a good range of aspects of school governance, including school finance and the performance management of headteachers. However, many of these courses are not well attended. More recently, officers have started to think of alternative ways of engaging governors, for example through e-learning modules. The local authority has formalised its approach to the use of 'champion' governors during this academic year. These governors have specific skills and expertise and use this to strengthen governing bodies that need support. Challenge advisers provide additional support for governing bodies in schools that are categorised as red or amber. However, over time, support to promote effective governance has been weak. Members of governing bodies have not always held school leaders to account for the standards pupils achieve or their financial position robustly enough.

### **How well do the local authority's strategies meet the needs of its more able pupils?**

In Powys, more able pupils are provided with a suitable range of opportunities to reach their academic potential. Officers in Powys facilitate valuable networks for more able pupils in key stage 4 and post-16, including regional SEREN<sup>1</sup> and junior SEREN hubs for those pupils identified as having the potential to progress to the UK's top universities. The SEREN hubs support these pupils' applications to Russell Group universities and, as a result, most SEREN participants go on to apply and receive offers.

The local authority organises a careers fair for all learners with a wide range of exhibitors. This encourages more able pupils to consider a broad range of stretching

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<sup>1</sup> SEREN is a Welsh Government programme aimed to get more bright students to apply for the best universities



education, enterprise and employment prospects locally, nationally and across the UK.

Challenge advisers engage in dialogue appropriately with school leaders regarding the performance of more able pupils. They assist in sharing good practice across primary schools, such as the 'Genius Hour' to promote enquiry, research, creativity, and self-directed learning. In addition, they encourage schools to work alongside other providers across the ERW region on collaborative projects to stimulate challenge for more able pupils. Challenge advisers consider the appropriateness of the school curriculum at key stage 4 and post-16 and, as a result, a few schools have adopted alternative models and innovative modes of delivery that enrich the offer for more able pupils. Challenge advisers share helpful guidance and promote the national Quality Standards in Education for More Able and Talented Pupils, for more effective self-evaluation of provision with all schools. However, the local authority does not consider well enough the impact of its provision and support on the progression of more able and talented pupils.

### **How effective is the provision for pupils with additional learning needs?**

There is inadequate coordination, evaluation and planning across the authority for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) or who may require extra support.

The local authority's vision for SEN is not communicated effectively to schools. The additional learning needs (ALN) policy provides adequate information, but focuses exclusively on the needs of pupils with special educational needs. There is a confusion in the use of the terminology of ALN. As a result, information is confusing for schools and stakeholders, and limits their understanding of the full range of support and provision available for a variety of pupils' needs.

A range of provision is available for pupils with SEN across the local authority. Presently, this provision is in mainstream schools, specialist resource bases, pupil referral units (PRU) and in special schools. Specialist resource bases are cluster based and offer placements for pupils with moderate or general learning difficulties at primary and secondary levels. The three special schools offer placements for pupils with more severe learning difficulties and one specialises in behavioural challenges. However, the access to specialist placements is overcomplex. The authority has recognised this issue, and they are streamlining the referral route for schools from September 2019.

The authority is currently reviewing its provision for pupils with SEN. Specifically, they are reviewing the specialist resource centres. The consultation with mainstream school headteachers is inconsistent, leading to a lack of clarity about the re-organisation of the specialist resource centres. Currently, there is limited analysis made of the data available to the authority to predict the profile of pupil needs presently and in the future. As a result, this limits the authority's ability to plan and adjust the provision for pupils effectively enough.

Local authority officers are supporting the three special schools and pupil referral units to provide more proactive outreach support for pupils with SEN and staff in mainstream schools. This is beginning to have a positive impact, broadening the skill set of mainstream staff and allowing pupils to remain in their mainstream schools. However, there is very limited ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the quality of this support by the local authority officers.

A range of officers are responsible for groups of pupils with who may require extra support. These include pupils who are in elective home education, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, pupils with looked after status and those with English as an additional language. Provision for these groups of pupils is too variable. There are inconsistencies in the levels of quality monitoring, data analysis and limited work across teams to share information. As a result, there are lost opportunities to gain a comprehensive overview of the needs of pupils who may require extra support across the local authority. This limits the authority's ability to plan resources to match the needs of pupils efficiently enough.

### **How effective is the local authority's provision for behaviour support?**

Powys has a range of provision to support learner behaviour. This includes a special school for key stage 2 to key stage 5 learners and three pupil referral units (PRU) for key stage 3 and key stage 4 learners.

There is a defined vision, a set of key principles and a pathway to support the improvement of outcomes for learners with emotional and behavioural needs. There is also a focus on developing processes to work more effectively in partnership with schools and to ensure a more coherent approach to the delivery of services. The local authority has reviewed its processes for accessing support or advice to ensure they are streamlined and consistent. The authority has also recently reviewed its policy and provision in relation to behaviour, including the functions of the PRU. It has identified the need to develop provision for key stage 2 pupils and an outreach service to schools. The PRU will also be aligned into two sites from September 2019, with the aim of complementing the outreach service offered by the special school and facilitate effective partnership working. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of these initiatives on learners.

The local authority's Team Around the School approach provides an opportunity to support the development of integrated working across teams. The Educational Psychology Service, Learning Inclusion and Support (LIST) team and the behaviour team provide a range of useful interventions, preventative approaches, training and support to schools. There is some evidence of impact at an individual learner level, although broader analysis of impact is underdeveloped.

Work with the Healthy Schools scheme has supported the development of effective strategies to improve the wellbeing of pupils and reduce instances of bullying in primary schools through programmes such as KiVa<sup>2</sup> and Incredible Years<sup>3</sup>. The majority of primary schools have trained their staff in the KiVa programme over the past four years. The local authority's analysis of this programme shows significant reductions in bullying and victimisation, with the greatest reductions in schools with high levels of poverty. The authority understands its duty in relation to tackling discrimination and has a system of monitoring racist incidents, although there is no approach to monitoring incidents of bullying more generally.

The authority promotes early identification and intervention in order to support pupils' behaviour in mainstream schools. It has a clear managed-move policy and has

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<sup>2</sup> KiVa is a research-based antibullying program that has been developed in the University of Turku, Finland, with funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture

<sup>3</sup> The Incredible Years evidence-based programmes for parents, teachers, and children reduce challenging behaviors in children and increase their social emotional learning and self-control skills

facilitated managed-moves appropriately. Pupils at risk of exclusion are considered at the local authority's Social Inclusion Panel to identify support. Although there is anecdotal information to suggest that support has been worthwhile, detailed and systematic evaluation and reporting in relation to improving behaviour and reducing exclusions is underdeveloped. Overall, exclusions remain high.

Overall, there is limited evaluation by the local authority of its provision for behaviour support and the evaluation of pupil progress. This limits the authority's ability to gauge its impact about specific issues.

### **How well has the local authority addressed school reorganisation issues including the provision for post-16?**

Overall, the authority's proposals for school reorganisation have a clear rationale and are in line with its vision for modernising education. Their new strategic policy and delivery plan provide a suitable framework for future development and allow officers to address flexibly many of the different challenges in the school estate. These challenges include the rationalisation of secondary and primary schools, post-16 education and developing Welsh-medium provision in the county. Despite making modest progress in reorganising primary schools over time, the authority has been unable to deliver on a few key proposals in recent years, particularly following consultation to reorganise secondary schools in south Powys. Surplus places remain too high across the county.

The authority is now focusing appropriately on working in partnership with schools and communities to consider alternative models of delivering education. Officers have prioritised the need to ensure a thorough understanding among key stakeholders and have sharpened their use of data in order to support decision-making and increase the pace of change. The authority's transformation team work well to ensure that consultation processes are transparent and well organised. These processes, however, place heavy demands on a comparatively small team of officers. The authority has a clear strategy to improve the quality of school buildings. However, a minority of school buildings are in a poor condition.

The authority has a suitable long-term vision to provide equality of provision for Welsh-medium learners in Powys and the objectives of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (2017-2020) are appropriate. However, the authority's record on stimulating the growth of Welsh-medium education is weak. As a result, the proportion of pupils receiving their education through the medium of Welsh has stagnated over recent years. The authority is currently investigating the feasibility of establishing a Welsh-medium school as part of the review of secondary schools in north Powys.

The authority offers early education places exclusively in non-maintained settings in Powys. Local authority officers estimate that around 80% to 90% of children benefit from receiving early education. However, they do not have a clear enough understanding of whether there are sufficient places available for children within a reasonable distance of their homes to access early education in the preferred language choice of their parents or guardians. This provision is not available through the medium of Welsh in a few areas within the authority.

Until very recently, the authority has made very little progress in addressing the challenges of post-16 education in Powys. These challenges include rapidly

decreasing numbers of learners choosing to attend school sixth forms, and choosing to attend college or schools outside of Powys instead. This has resulted in significantly reduced levels of funding for sixth forms and the narrowing of the curriculum they offer. The authority recognises these challenges and has very recently undertaken a review of sixth form provision. At this stage, leaders have presented an evidence-based case for change and, in partnership with headteachers, have proposed a range of short-term and longer term solutions to deliver a new model for post-16 education.

### **Leadership and management**

The local authority has not made strong, sustainable improvements to address many of the shortcomings identified during previous inspections. Many of the issues remain areas of significant concern. Recommendations within the last two Estyn inspection reports (in 2007 and 2011) continue to be areas of concern, such as the provision for additional learning needs, and school reorganisation. In addition, the issues raised during this inspection are similar to those raised in two Wales Audit Office inspection reports issued in 2012 and 2017. Also, over the last five years, too many schools were in a category of causing concern to Estyn and too many schools continue to have high deficit balances. The authority has been too slow in using its full range of powers to intervene to improve schools, their leadership teams and governing bodies.

Over the last three years, there has been a significant change in senior officers, including at chief executive, director and head of service levels. At the time of the inspection, further change in key senior education posts are forecast for the near future. The high proportion of significant personnel changes has affected the continuity and delivery of action plans over time and in the overall impact of leadership in key areas of the authority's work.

The local authority has a clear vision for the future, and has developed its Vision 2025 corporate improvement plan. Within the plan, the leader and chief executive set out their desire to strengthen learning and skills within the local authority. The plan reflects relevant national and local priorities appropriately, including the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and takes good account of the local needs of children and young people. The authority has worked well with stakeholders and partners to develop the vision, with a strong focus on developing new ways of working and delivering services.

Within a short amount of time, the newly appointed chief executive has understood the main strengths and areas for development well and is realistic about the gravity of the challenges facing the authority. She has brought a new vigour to addressing key areas and for strengthening the joint working within the local authority's departments and across elected member groups, but these are at an early stage of development.

The local authority has been slow to develop its scrutiny arrangements and, until very recently, challenge has been weak. Within the last year, the local authority has revised its scrutiny structure to include three committees linked to the priorities in its corporate plan. Within its work programme, the learning and skills scrutiny

committee consider a range of relevant issues facing the education service, such as the revision of the funding formula for schools. There is now better joint planning between cabinet and scrutiny committees to co-ordinate work programmes that is supporting informed decision-making. In recent meetings, scrutiny members have begun to challenge cabinet members and officers more robustly, asking pertinent and reasonable questions regarding the information provided. However, the quality of reports presented by officers to scrutiny varies, and the lack of candid reporting has meant elected members are generally unsighted to the gravity of issues and their implications. Often, reports lack sufficient detail to provide scrutiny with confidence that necessary actions are being taken.

The Cabinet consists of a coalition of the Independent group and the Conservative group, together they have a majority of the elected members on the local authority. The coalition's cross-party working and the composition of the cabinet enable the authority to develop a broader consensus. Elected members collaborate well with officers. For example, members are involved in the work of the education service through regular engagement with many of the working groups.

The local authority provides frequent elected member seminars, but over the past three years there have only been a few instances where education specific seminars have taken place. As a result, there are too few opportunities to ensure that elected members have the necessary understanding in order to make informed decisions and set strategic direction in this field.

Over many years, elected members have been reluctant to take robust enough action on a number of important issues, such as around the provision for post-16 education and on secondary school reorganisation.

The local authority's relationship with schools is generally collaborative and cooperative but, over time, it has not been challenging enough in a number of important areas. For example, it has not used its full range of powers to make sure that schools causing concern improve quickly enough.

The local authority does not have a robust and ongoing self-evaluation process for its education services. Education services are not proactive in using self-evaluation to drive improvement, which inhibits their ability to consider strengths or important areas for improvement well enough. Recently, the senior leaders have developed a better understanding of the main issues facing the local authority, and elected members are beginning to challenge performance and address critical situations with more gusto. However, pace of improvement continues to be too slow.

Improvement planning within education services is weak. Key milestones linked to objectives are too broad and specific sections within the education service plan are underdeveloped. A suitable level of quality assurance at a corporate level has not been applied to the education service plan. Although education services maintain a large volume of performance targets, these are not always linked to their key priorities or areas requiring improvement. Education services do not have a clear rationale for setting targets. The corporate process for monitoring targets does not

always identify significant shortfalls in outcomes due to its high tolerance level. This does not support risk management or the pace of progress within the local authority. Where exception reporting does occur, follow up actions are underdeveloped and lack the detail needed to secure improvement.

Staff in the education service have participated in a range of useful continued professional development to support their work. This includes involvement in professional enquiry, multi-agency training, participation in national working groups and formally accredited courses. In comparison with other council services, very few education service staff have undertaken courses linked to a leadership pathway. This results in limited opportunities to manage leadership succession planning within the service.

School improvement officers shadow colleagues in other local authorities and are active inspectors on inspections of schools and non-maintained settings. This is helpful for their professional learning and improves the support they provide to schools and settings. The local authority works effectively with ERW to support the professional development of challenge advisers and other school improvement staff.

Overall, performance management arrangements in education are not given a high enough priority. The arrangements do not support staff well enough in their development, to contribute to the delivery of plans or allow managers to hold staff to account.

The local authority has an appropriate range of clear policies and procedures for safeguarding in education. Leaders and managers in education, designated safeguarding leads, and other staff are supported well by appropriate training, and through advice and guidance as required on a case-by-case basis. The local authority monitors closely how well schools undertaking pre-appointment checks for paid staff and volunteers. However, it does not monitor the recruitment of volunteers rigorously enough.

The local authority has recently introduced an annual self-evaluation audit of schools safeguarding activity following the all Wales safeguarding audit model. The recent audit returns have been monitored, and areas for improvement identified. Following evaluation, the next audit round will include questions for each school about its management of recruiting and appointing volunteers, and any pre-appointment checks.

The local authority has prioritised its schools in terms of its revenue and capital budget allocations in recent years. However, the local authority recognises that it maintains more schools than is sustainable and that the transformation of the school estate is fundamental to improving resourcing within its schools. Although the local authority has, over many years, reduced the number of schools it maintains, the rate of change has been too slow to keep pace with the decline in pupil numbers.

Appropriately, the local authority requires schools to plan financially for the medium term. Alongside their annual funding allocation, officers provide schools with helpful indicative allocations for the next three or four years. Schools, in turn, produce draft

budgets, helping them to plan any necessary changes in their staffing and alerting the authority to the potential for future problems.

The recent work of revising the local authority's formula for delegating funds to schools has been well led and, for the most part, involved an appropriately structured consultation with schools. The new formula is soundly based on curricular and other relevant principles and brings greater transparency to the allocation of funding to schools from April 2019.

The local authority's lack of impact in improving the quality of financial management in a few schools has, for many years, been the subject of criticism in inspection and audit reports. Although there was a significant improvement during 2018-2019 in the level of schools' balances, financial management in a few schools remains an area of concern that is not addressed adequately in planning within the education service. The historic lack of effective challenge to the quality of financial management in schools has resulted in a small number of schools failing to recover from deficits for many years, in contravention of the local authority's Scheme for Financing Schools. In a very small number of schools, the size of their deficits has grown so large that recovery within the maximum of five years, as required by the Scheme, is no longer feasible.

The local authority is now being consistent and systematic in deciding whether to license deficits and, where necessary, in issuing warning notices. However, the local authority's reluctance to use its intervention powers to address financial issues in extreme cases has exacerbated the problem in those schools and reflects weaknesses in corporate leadership. Elected members discuss matters relating to education finance frequently. However, the briefing papers provided to them by officers are not consistently clear in explaining an often complex and dynamic picture.

## Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website ([www.estyn.gov.wales](http://www.estyn.gov.wales))

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

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