



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

**Report following monitoring of
Local authority causing significant concern**

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by

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This report is also available in Welsh.

Outcome of visit

Pembrokeshire County Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the 2019 core inspection and will be removed from the follow-up category of causing significant concern.

Progress since the last inspection

Recommendation 1: Raise standards in schools, particularly in literacy, numeracy and Welsh second language

We are unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the suspension of inspections of schools and most other education providers between March 2020 and February 2022. It is also due to the lack of comparative national data about outcomes that can be compared over time as the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded.

Since the inspection, the local authority has reviewed its approach to supporting schools to improve. It has made key appointments which has brought quality and valuable experience into the work of the service. There has been a tangible improvement in working relationships with schools which has partly been a by-product of the increased engagement and important support provided by the local authority during the COVID-19 lockdown period. The local authority has cemented a more productive working relationship with schools through the involvement of headteachers in reference groups and seeking their views on new developments.

The local authority has developed a much clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of its schools. Officers consider a range of indicators and information from engagements with schools to help inform the discussion with school leaders about what support might be needed. Officers identify schools needing additional support at an early stage and intervene when appropriate.

The pandemic has increased the challenges facing schools particularly in terms of gaps in learning and weaker skills in reading, writing, mathematics and Welsh. The local authority has established mathematics and language strategy groups, which include headteachers, and subject lead networks, which contribute to the priority of raising standards in literacy and numeracy. Their approach is based on working with partners, providing clarity and direction to school leaders, identifying and commissioning professional learning opportunities and promoting collaboration between schools. School leaders appreciate the guidance given by officers but also the trust they are given to seek their own solutions to the challenges of raising standards. The school improvement service, 'Partneriaeth', supports and complements the work of the strategy groups through professional learning and subject area improvement adviser support.

The local authority has established networks to support the learning between schools in these key areas. The local authority's evaluation indicates that there has been greater progress in language and literacy than in mathematics and numeracy. Our

work with schools causing concern indicates that standards have improved and that the building blocks are in place to sustain this improvement.

Overall, the local authority presented a well-considered Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). Officers consulted with a wide range of partners in its development and the plan identifies proposals which, if implemented, have the potential to improve significantly access to Welsh medium provision across much of the local authority.

A key feature of the WESP is to improve the provision and quality of Welsh in the local authority's schools which teach primarily through the medium of English. The local authority has identified the need to provide greater professional developmental opportunities for staff and officers responsible for this work have developed a wide-ranging suite of resources to schools which have been well received. A few English medium schools have placed a strong priority on improving the Welsh language skills of their teaching and support staff which has contributed well to improving their Welsh language provision. The local authority is also carrying out focused work in one secondary school and three of its feeder schools. The aim of this pilot is to provide a blueprint for improving the delivery of Welsh across the local authority's English medium schools. Nearly all headteachers are positive about the quality of support provided by the local authority team.

Recommendation 2: Improve the outcomes for all groups of learners, including those eligible for free school meals and those who are more able

The local authority's approach to improving outcomes for learners is based around improving teaching and learning across its schools. Improvement advisers' visits to schools focus on strengthening the support and monitoring of provision for all learners including disadvantaged learners. Early evaluations through questionnaires and discussions with school leaders suggest that school leaders have a deeper understanding of the barriers to learning for disadvantaged learners and how they can address them more effectively.

All secondary schools and targeted primary schools have a peer tutoring approach to support disadvantaged learners. This approach is beginning gain traction and feedback from tutors and tutees is positive. The roll out of training for peer tutors in schools to is increasing capacity and beginning to strengthen the impact of the approach.

The local authority has a range of approaches to ensure that learners move on to meaningful training or employment pathways. These include broadening the vocational opportunities for learners such as through the Junior Apprenticeship scheme, a few of which are available through the medium of Welsh. The pre engagement programme (PEP) supports well the needs of the most vulnerable Year 11 learners and reduces the risk of them becoming NEET (not in education employment or training). These approaches, combined with already well-established support including the Cynnydd¹ project and the team around pupil, parent and

¹ Cynnydd is a regional European Structural Funds programme that is aimed at supporting pupils aged 11yrs – 24yrs who are at risk of disengaging from education. Pembrokeshire County Council's Cynnydd programme provides additional support to pupils enrolled in and across all of Pembrokeshire's Secondary Schools and Special Units.

schools (TAPPAS), provide increasingly effective support for the most vulnerable learners.

The recent launch of the three-year strategy for a whole school approach to mental health and well being (WSAMHWP) provides a worthwhile overview of strategies and interventions for schools to support and promote this important aspect for learners. The WSAMHWP strategy is supported by specialist training opportunities, which include inputs to better understand the impact of trauma on children and young people. This approach is contributing to lowering exclusion figures across primary and secondary schools. The local authority has also piloted emotional literacy training for support assistants to help schools provide interventions to improve learner well being. The pilot outcomes are encouraging, with significant improvements in learner well being measures following the six-week intervention programme.

The local authority's focus on improving outcomes for all higher achieving learners includes increasing numbers that access specific programmes such as the 'Seren' programme and additional curricular opportunities such as Philosophy Masterclasses. This is contributing to increasing the number of learners entering the Russell Group universities.

Effective support is in place for the local authority to manage the additional learning needs reforms. Officers have improved their processes to support the individual development plan (IDP) panels, increased the involvement of additional learning needs co ordinators (ALNCOs) in local authority decision making processes and improved links with the regional health board. The online IDP digital platform is operational and effective and helps information sharing with agencies, schools, parents, and carers to better meet the needs of identified learners.

Recommendation 3: Improve the effectiveness of the authority's work to improve teaching and school leadership

Since the inspection, the local authority has increased its focus on improving teaching and learning across its schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local authority officers worked alongside practitioners from a range of schools as well as the regional school support partners to develop and promote a range of learning resources and training materials. These included good practice examples of blended learning teaching strategies, based on sound research and established practice. The local authority introduced a digital platform for schools to enable them to share resources and provide support for teachers. The local authority re-evaluated the suitability of the platform following feedback from headteachers and decided to move the resources to the Welsh Government's digital platform Hwb. This reflects their willingness to listen to school leaders and adapt their support to better meet their needs.

The local authority has worked well with school leaders and staff to develop a better understanding of evidence-based teaching and learning approaches. This includes a strong focus on research-based approaches, which aligns with the Welsh Government's National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry. In addition, the local authority has worked with the Educational Endowment Foundation, leading practitioners and facilitators to provide helpful guidance and support for teachers and leaders. Local authority officers also recognise and emphasise that leaders and

teachers are often in the best position to determine which approaches work in their individual context.

The local authority, 'Partneriaeth' and external providers have also been working with schools on curriculum design to help prepare them for implementing the Curriculum for Wales. These workshops have provided opportunities to strengthen links within and between cluster schools. The approach reflects the improved working relationships between the local authority and schools, with both having a better understanding of their joint responsibility to improve outcomes for children and young people. The local authority has also worked well with curriculum leaders from 'Partneriaeth' to help develop useful guidance on key curricular areas such as religion, values and ethics.

A notable feature of the change in culture across the local authority is the introduction of the new approach to school performance management arrangements based on the 'Schools as Learning Organisations' approach. The local authority is working with 'Partneriaeth' to develop this work based on coaching and mentoring approaches, with nearly all schools choosing to participate.

The local authority has developed support, guidance and professional learning opportunities for school leaders, particularly middle leaders, which have been well received. A by-product of this work has been the establishment of senior and middle leaders' networks to encourage better school to school support and sharing of effective practice. This includes setting-up networks with schools in neighbouring local authorities. A developing feature of the local authority's work is the establishment of soft federation arrangements between schools, particularly those experiencing recruitment issues. To date, five executive headteacher arrangements have been put in place since the last inspection. Generally, these arrangements are helping to provide stable and experienced leadership in these schools.

At the time of the inspection, three of the local authority's secondary schools were in a follow-up category. Since then, two schools have made sufficient progress to come out of follow-up, although one secondary school has until recently only demonstrated limited progress against the recommendations from its inspection. Recent improvements in leadership, teaching and stronger relationships with its cluster schools have helped this school to progress well to address the shortcomings identified by the core inspection team.

Recently, the local authority has endeavoured to strengthen its approach to professionalising school governors. This has included providing an updated self-review process for governing bodies as well as developing a bank of resources to support governors to ask appropriate questions on curriculum, teaching and learning as part of their role. Officers have also arranged a face to face and an online conference to share good practice and focus on key themes such as professional learning and well being. The local authority recognises that challenges remain in attracting governors to these events and ensuring that they undertake regular suitable training to better support their schools.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen the quality of evaluation by officers at all levels to improve the precision of planning for improvement

Senior leaders in education services took on board the findings of the inspection in December 2019. They developed a suitable strategy to support officers working in education services to have a better understanding of how they can evaluate the impact of their work, and how to plan effectively for improvement. Although the implementation of this strategy was delayed by other priorities during the pandemic, work has accelerated in the last year.

Officers at all levels have been involved in useful professional learning and dialogue about evaluation and improvement planning. This is leading to cultural change in the way that officers plan their work by having a clearer focus before actions are taken on how they will evaluate the impact. As a result, officers are involved in a range of activities that are giving them useful information about the extent to which their actions are beginning to have the desired impact. Importantly, the authority is focused on sustainable improvements in outcomes for learners.

Senior officers have a good oversight of the quality of work of officers. They are open about what is working well and what isn't. They routinely monitor reports that officers write about individual schools or education services. They challenge officers if they are not satisfied with the quality of a report and support them to improve. Overall, officers' evaluations are sharper and more useful than at the time of the inspection.

Many plans for improvement include purposeful actions linked to strategic aims. These actions have identified lead officers and resources allocated and set out how the work will be evaluated and what impact is expected. Senior officers are aware of plans that are not meeting their expectations and are providing appropriate support and challenge to lead officers.

'Partneriaeth' has been operating as a new regional school improvement service since April 2022, providing professional learning for schools in the local authority. The authority's senior officers challenge 'Partneriaeth' officers on the quality of evaluation of their work where it does not provide information about the service's impact.

Senior officers are making good use of external partners to support their evaluations and improvement planning, for example through representative headteachers and the education improvement board.

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