



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



A report on education services in

Caerphilly County Borough Council

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by

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About Caerphilly County Borough Council

Caerphilly has 27,576 pupils across 86 schools. There are 73 primary schools, one all-age school, 11 secondary schools, and one special school. Of these schools, 12 are Welsh-medium providers.

Over a three-year average, 26% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, higher than the Wales average of 23%.

The local authority's last inspection was in July 2012, with monitoring visits in October 2013, and January 2014.

In 2023-2024, the local authority's education budget is £212,769,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2023-2024 is £5,168, lower than the Wales average of £5,386.

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 Caerphilly is noted below:

- 5.4% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minority groups, lower than the Wales average of 14.3%
- 4.6% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action)
- 5.1% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action Plus)
- 2.5% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Statemented)
- 0.6% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan).
- 1.3% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A, B or C).
- 15.2% of pupils aged 5 or over are fluent in Welsh, lower than the Wales average of 15.3%
- A total of 465 children are in the care of the local authority

Note: for children looked after the data has been rounded to the nearest 5 for disclosure reasons.

Summary

Caerphilly's education services are led very capably by the Chief Education Officer and her senior team. The team put the best interests of children and young people at the heart of the decisions they make. The education service receives effective support from the corporate management team. The service makes a strong contribution to the Council's vision to secure 'better futures for all' in Caerphilly.

In partnership with the regional Education Achievement Service (EAS), the local authority provides effective services to support and challenge schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) to improve. A 'Team Around the School' is used to support new headteachers and to co-ordinate additional support for schools and PRUs that are causing concern. This effective approach brings relevant staff in the local authority, EAS and headteachers together to explore issues schools are facing, and is supported by intelligent use of data.

The local authority's targeted work to support school attendance has improved over the last year. Attendance for the current school year is in line with the average for Wales, which is a relatively strong position given the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. The authority's work to reduce exclusions is less effective, however, and fixed-term and permanent exclusions are too high.

The local authority is committed to tackling the impact of poverty on education outcomes. In partnership with other agencies, the local authority provides strong support for the early years of a child's life. The authority provides helpful services to support children, young people and their families through community-focused schools.

Officers in the additional learning needs (ALN) service provide highly effective support for schools, PRUs and other education settings. The local authority has taken a strategic and systematic approach to implementing ALN reform.

Around a third of primary schools in Caerphilly are led by an executive headteacher, either as part of a formal federation or through an informal collaboration between two schools. These shared arrangements have supported the sustainability of schools, provided richer opportunities for professional learning for staff and helped to address concerns where these existed. The local authority makes effective use of spare capacity in school buildings to provide beneficial services to learners and their families, such as community hubs, a Welsh immersion centre and specialist classes for pupils with additional learning needs.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding across the local authority service areas and this is reflected, managed and delivered well in its education services.

The education service has an embedded culture of reflecting on the effectiveness of services and planning for improvements. However, whilst there are considerable strengths in education services, managers do not always evaluate well enough the impact that specific services or grant funding have on learners' outcomes or consider value for money.

Elected members ensure that education remains a high priority for the council. They generally have a good understanding of the education service and work purposefully alongside officers. They make informed decisions about services, schools and other settings. In scrutiny meetings, elected members put challenging questions to officers, but do not always hold Cabinet to account well enough.

Staff who work in education services benefit from useful professional learning opportunities. The Chief Education Officer leads by example in supporting the well-being of staff in the education service as well as staff in schools and other settings.

The local authority manages its education budget well. It has a good understanding of the financial position of schools and provides good support for schools to manage their budgets.

Recommendations

- R1 Focus evaluation and improvement planning of education services more consistently on their impact on learners' outcomes and their value for money
- R2 Improve the processes and strategies to support and challenge schools to reduce the rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusions

What happens next

Following the publication of the inspection report, the local authority should update its plans to address the recommendations and to take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority should update its plans within three months of the publication of the inspection report.

Main findings

Outcomes

We are unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes. This is due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the inspections of schools and most other education providers to be suspended since March 2020. It is also due to the lack of data on outcomes that can be compared over time because the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded. This also affected most of the other data that we consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations, but we have recently begun to receive this type of data again. Any evaluations that follow provide a context by reporting pre-pandemic outcomes or relate to more recent outcomes where the evidence base is valid and reliable.

Prior to the pandemic, we inspected 33 schools in Caerphilly between September 2017 and March 2020. Outcomes for these school inspections were broadly in line with national averages.

Since inspections restarted after the pandemic, we inspected 36 schools and a PRU in Caerphilly between March 2022 and June 2024. The proportion of these providers that have required any level of follow-up to address areas for improvement identified in the inspection report is broadly in line with the proportion of providers nationally that have required follow-up. Six non-maintained settings were inspected during the same period, and no setting has required any level of follow-up.

School attendance has been notably lower since the pandemic than it was before the pandemic. Attendance across all schools in Caerphilly in 2022-2023 was lower than the national average but, given the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, attendance was reasonable relative to the national average. Attendance in 2023-2024, at the time of the inspection, was the same as the national average, which is a notable improvement given the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. Despite this improvement overall, a minority of learners eligible for free school meals in secondary schools miss more than a day a week of school on average.

The number of learners excluded from school in Caerphilly has increased considerably since the pandemic. The rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusions are too high.

Over the last three years, the proportion of learners in Caerphilly at the end of Year 11 who continue in full-time education at a sixth form or college is around the same as the average in Wales. The proportion of learners at this stage who are not in education, employment or training is also around the Wales average.

Through the youth service, over 2,000 young people gain formal and informal accreditation each year including, for example, GCSEs, Youth Achievement Awards, Duke of Edinburgh Awards and locally accredited awards such as in sport and outdoor education. Participating in youth service activities makes an important contribution to the development of young people's personal and social skills.

Children's and young people's well-being is supported positively through a wide range of preventative and intervention services provided by the local authority and its partners. Learners who access Caerphilly's school-based counselling service experience similar improvements in their well-being to the average outcomes for counselling services across Wales. However, the proportion of learners who access the service in Caerphilly is notably lower than the national average.

Young people involved in the Youth Forum participate enthusiastically and constructively. As well as supporting strategic decision-making in the local authority, young people across the county choose a specific issue to focus on as a project each year and benefit from the output of this project. For example, a recent project focused on helping young people understand what to do in an emergency situation. Young people developed and produced a board game called 'Siren' which has supported the development of young people's understanding and skills relating to their personal safety. The opportunities for young people across all areas of Caerphilly to have their views represented at Youth Forum meetings and the annual conference are limited by the variable engagement of secondary schools.

Education services

How well does the local authority support and effect school improvement?

Officers within the education service have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the schools and PRUs in the authority and their headteachers. School improvement work is driven by a shared moral purpose to ensure the best outcomes and experiences for pupils.

There are strong relationships between officers in the local authority and leaders of schools and PRUs. These help to create a culture of trust where school and PRU leaders value the significant support that is readily available to them from the local authority, but are also expectant and accepting of the challenge that is consistently offered.

There is a clear strategy for school improvement. Local authority officers across the service and from other services work together purposefully to provide a co-ordinated and comprehensive school improvement service. For example, in wider group meetings, officers share information regarding a broad range of aspects such as safeguarding, attendance, finance and additional learning needs to identify any potential issues and ensure that appropriate support is targeted to address these issues.

Officers work well with their colleagues in the regionally commissioned Education Achievement Service (EAS). This collaborative partnership has developed and strengthened significantly over time, resulting in an increasingly effective and joined-up approach to school improvement. The local authority direct carefully the support provided by the EAS, ensuring that it is bespoke to the needs of Caerphilly schools and PRUs and to take account of the authority's priorities. For example, there is a specific approach to implementing 'Team Around the School' and EAS provides thematic reports on the authority's priorities. Support for providers focuses suitably on important aspects such as teaching and learning, curriculum development and leadership, though the nature of this support is tailored sensibly to the needs of

individual providers. There is improved support for Welsh-medium settings. Partner providers with expertise in specific areas are generally used effectively to support others.

There are sound, comprehensive systems for bringing together all the relevant information about schools and PRUs and the work of the local authority and the EAS. There is a systematic process for sharing information within the authority and between the authority and the EAS, both through electronic systems and helpful formal and informal meetings. As a result, the authority and the EAS usually know their schools and PRUs very well. They know where the good practice lies and use this well to support other providers, but also know where improvements are needed.

The healthy relationships between local authority officers and the EAS staff mean that officers are able to shape, question and challenge the provision from the EAS. For example, they have worked together to make beneficial changes to improve consistency in the work of School Improvement Partners (SIPs). Clear expectations and guidance from both the authority and the EAS are shared with SIPs.

Over recent years, the authority and the EAS have improved their focus on quality assurance of school improvement work. There are suitable systems to quality assure the work of SIPs and Principal School Improvement Partners (PSIPs).

There is a culture of regular self-evaluation and reflection in the local authority that enables officers to identify specific aspects of the work of schools or PRUs in need of further attention or improvement, such as the work of governors. Officers and SIPs make effective use of data, intelligence and inspection outcomes to track school and PRU performance and to identify those in need of support or general aspects in need of improvement or review. For example, digital skills and provision for Welsh were identified as common areas for improvement from analysing recommendations from inspections. Officers and SIPs are increasingly focused on evaluating the impact of their work through, for example, analysis of first-hand evidence via the supported self-evaluation system or Monitoring, Evaluation and Review (MER) processes. However, the quality of the evaluation of impact is varied.

The concept of commissioned thematic reports is helpful. This provides a useful process to focus on priorities specific to the authority. The activities used to inform them, such as questionnaires and work scrutiny, are valuable. However, the evidence used to inform thematic reports is not triangulated well enough and reports do not provide a clear and accessible overview of strengths and areas for improvement in specific areas. As a result, though the process is valuable, the end product does not provide as useful a platform for further improvement as it could. In addition, actions arising from evaluation activities such as MERs and thematic reports, are not always clear or focused enough on the expected impact on learners.

Improving the work of school governors is a priority in the service's current improvement plan. The local authority and the EAS work in partnership to provide valuable support for governors. For example, they have provided bespoke courses for governing bodies within clusters of schools and guidance on headteacher reports to governors. Where necessary, the authority has also intervened to strengthen governing bodies by adding additional members with particular skills and expertise.

The local authority's early support and intervention process, Team Around the School, is effective in providing support to schools and PRUs when issues arise rather than when they are recognised through inspection. A notable feature of this process and an indicator of the high levels of trust between the authority and schools is that providers volunteer themselves to part of this process should they feel the need. Another notable feature is that all headteachers who are new to the authority or new to headship are involved in this process, as well as being supported by a comprehensive induction programme. This enables new headteachers to get to know local authority officers and vice versa, and to access any support necessary. The Team Around the School approach provides a comprehensive package of support focused on the specific needs and priorities of the provider.

Schools that are placed in any category of follow-up after their inspection usually make good progress and come out of their category in a timely manner. In a very few instances, however, schools in need of additional support have not been identified early enough or information has not been as accurate as it could be.

Overall, school improvement services have a positive impact as school inspection outcomes for schools and PRUs are broadly in line with the national average.

How effective are the processes and strategies for improving attendance and reducing exclusions?

The local authority has a clear strategy for improving school attendance. This is reflected appropriately in the council's corporate vision and plan as well as within the specific plans of the education service. The local authority communicates its strategy for improving attendance effectively with schools and other stakeholders across the local authority. Leaders have a clear understanding of how they should direct their work to improve attendance.

The local authority has useful processes for monitoring and evaluating attendance. Officers have strong relationships with lead staff for attendance in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs). They support and challenge them well to improve their rates of attendance and this is having a positive impact. Most schools are very positive about the local authority's strategy and processes and value the support and challenge from officers in supporting them to improve attendance.

The local authority has worked well alongside schools and PRUs to increase expectations around pupils' attendance following concerns about attendance last year. This includes setting challenging targets, and responding quickly to raise these targets as schools achieve them. The effective sharing of monthly attendance data between schools increases the challenge to further improve their attendance, particularly as schools can see the highest attendance rate for a school in a similar context.

Officers work closely with school leaders to support their self-evaluation of attendance and associated plans to improve attendance. This work is enhanced by a useful attendance toolkit developed recently in collaboration with schools. In addition, training for governors has helped raise the level of challenge they provide to school leaders.

The local authority has a range of useful multi-agency provisions for pupils who are educated other than at school (EOTAS). This includes PRUs and provision for pupils with emotional and mental health issues and those who are reluctant to attend school. For example, the 'Innovate' provision supports pupils and their families successfully to help pupils to re-engage in their learning and improve their attendance. In addition, there is an extensive range of beneficial strategies, processes and professional learning for schools to support these pupils. There are many examples of the positive impact of these strategies on individual pupils' engagement and attendance.

The authority's work with schools and PRUs is having a positive impact in increasing rates of attendance. Attendance rates have improved this academic year and are in line with national averages. A minority of schools have improved attendance above pre-pandemic rates. Rates of persistent absenteeism have reduced slightly over the last two years but remain too high, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals in secondary schools.

The local authority has recently revised its guidance for schools regarding exclusions and begun to evaluate the rate of exclusions linked to provision. For example, officers have recently reviewed the provision to support pupils' well-being in a few schools where there are higher rates of exclusion. This is beneficial in helping officers to strengthen the challenge to these schools and in supporting them to tailor their provision. This work with a few schools has led to a reduction in exclusions in these cases.

The educational psychology service provides beneficial support for pupils who are permanently excluded, including home visits, well-being interventions and support for integration into future placements. This support successfully enables pupils who were permanently excluded to re-engage with a school or other education settings where appropriate.

Leaders collect a range of useful data about exclusions, including for some specific groups of pupils such as those who are educated other than at school (EOTAS), those eligible for free school meals, those who have additional learning needs and children looked after by the local authority. Leaders are beginning to use this data to evaluate trends. However, the local authority does not have a detailed understanding of the rates of exclusion of all groups of pupils.

Fixed-term exclusions over five days have generally reduced over time, although they remain too high. The rates of permanent and fixed-term exclusions of five days or less have increased across the local authority in recent years. The processes across the local authority for analysing and evaluating the root causes of both permanent and fixed term exclusions are at an early stage of development.

How well does the local authority work to alleviate the impact of poverty on educational attainment?

Leaders across the service demonstrate clearly a strong, heartfelt commitment to reduce the impact of poverty for children, young people and their families. The shared vision, ambition and collective responsibility of 'Team Caerphilly' enables leaders to plan effectively to support the well-being of children and young people

from pre-birth, through settings and schools and onto the next stages of education, employment and training.

Officers consider a wide range of relevant, contextual data, which helps them know and understand well the needs of communities across Caerphilly. This enables them to target their resources effectively. The work to mitigate against the impact of poverty on educational attainment is evident across nearly all areas of the education service's improvement plan. Success criteria in these parts of the service plan generally include a focus on appropriate indicators, but these are not always sufficiently specific, or based firmly on the good knowledge officers have about their areas of work.

Teams collaborate well across service areas and with external partners to put in place a wide range of beneficial support and intervention. For example, helpful links between the early years team and the local health board ensure that, from the earliest days with the 'Healthy Start' antenatal scheme, personal support can be targeted at the most vulnerable families. The 'Caerphilly Cares' central point of contact and the library community hubs offer a useful platform for families to access support, as well as reading challenges to support children's literacy skills. Officers work closely with Menter Iaith to ensure resources are available in Welsh as well as English.

Caerphilly is piloting a community-focused school approach in one of their all-age schools and its cluster. Officers and school leaders have put in place a thoughtful range of beneficial, engaging and supportive practice. They have linked closely with the Sustainable Communities for Learning team to adapt a community room that is used during and beyond the school day, both for learning and as a base for agencies to connect with families. For example, adults can participate in the 'Multiply' project, which supports their numeracy skills and acts as a gateway to further training and accreditation. Across the cluster, pupils can access music tuition and a wide range of sporting opportunities to help them become more creative, active and to learn about healthy lifestyles, regardless of their household income. The community focused school approach is beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' well-being, and in particular, on attendance across the cluster.

Schools and settings that are not involved in the pilot are also adopting similar strategies, often seeking additional grant funding to do so. For example, they fund personal and social education programmes or add capacity by employing family liaison officers. The community focused school officers provide useful training and support for school and setting leaders and for governing bodies, which helps ensure that resources are used well to meet targeted needs.

The youth service has effective processes to identify, monitor and support young people at risk of disengaging with their education or training. For example, the 'Inspire' team offers a range of needs-led opportunities including frequent contact with at-risk young people through the summer holidays. The youth service works closely with schools, settings and other partners such as the education welfare service to identify young people at risk of becoming homeless and offer bespoke and targeted programmes. Overall, the local authority maintains contact with nearly all young people and is proactive in removing barriers to progress and supporting them into education, employment or training after Year 11.

SIPs monitor and agree schools' and early years settings' pupil development grant plans and discuss these with local authority officers. As a result, the local authority has a sound understanding of the grant-funded work that individual schools are carrying out to mitigate the impact of poverty. The local authority has commissioned regular thematic reviews of the use and impact of the pupil development grant in schools and the early years pupil development grant. Although these reports give a broad and helpful overview of information gathered from SIP visits, they are not always sufficiently precise. This means that the information shared does not inform well enough the local authority's strategic overview of the quality of work funded by this grant, or its impact on specific aspects of learning or progress.

The local authority's effective work to improve a wide range of well-being outcomes, and the impact on attendance, in particular, provides a strong base for improving the educational attainment of children and young people living in low-income households.

How well is the local authority supporting the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018?

The local authority's additional learning needs (ALN) service has focused successfully on responding to, and implementing, its statutory duties in response to the principles of the ALN and Education Tribunal Act (Wales) 2018. Senior leaders have taken a strategic, systematic and supportive approach throughout the transformation and implementation phases of ALN reform. The local authority provides a wide range of services that support children and young people with additional learning needs, their families and schools and settings well. These services focus successfully on building capacity in schools.

The statutory inclusion team and specialist advisory teachers are highly skilled and knowledgeable. They provide invaluable, systematic support to schools and early years settings. The high quality of the work of these officers is a notable feature of the work of the local authority in implementing ALN reform.

The local authority provides a wide range of advice, support and guidance. The authority has developed a useful 'Principles and Expectations' document which helpfully summarises the authority's expectation of the support arrangements in educational settings for children and young people with ALN. In supporting schools and settings, officers focus well on areas such as developing purposeful one-page profiles of pupils, beneficial individual development plans and effective teaching and learning approaches to support learners with ALN. Officers have facilitated valuable school cluster meetings to support the work of ALN co-ordinators (ALNCos).

Officers promote collaboration among schools to support them with implementation of ALN reform. A notable example of this is how the expert staff at Trinity Fields Special School, including Caerphilly Autistic Spectrum Service based at the school, provide an extensive range of high-quality specialist support to mainstream schools and settings. The staff from Trinity Fields Special School who provide this outreach support have a valuable impact on the quality of additional learning provision across the county. This outreach support complements very well the support provided by local authority officers.

The local authority communicates effectively with stakeholders and ensures that the views, wishes and feelings of learners, parents and carers are considered in the planning and provision of support. Person-centred practice is well-established in schools and settings, and officers support practitioners to implement individual development plans suitably. Officers regularly attend person-centred review meetings. As a result of this approach, ALN Cos develop very effective working relationships with officers in the local authority and are supported well to carry out their role. In addition, as a result of this support, families often build effective working relationships with trusted and familiar officers in the local authority, which supports their involvement in decisions regarding future provision and placement.

Leaders in the inclusion team have developed and implemented highly effective electronic platforms which support the identification of, and provision for, children and young people with ALN. Valuable information about pupils with ALN and provision to support these learners is available to relevant stakeholders through these secure digital platforms. These are used, for example, to support referral processes and share beneficial centralised resources. Staff from a range of agencies have provided advice and materials to populate these resources. The digital platforms support statutory processes well and enable providers to keep additional learning provision under review. This is a notable feature of the local authority which has been shared successfully across the sector.

The local authority ensures that its inclusion team can deliver most of its advice, guidance and training through the medium of Welsh. However, provision and resources to support learners with ALN in Welsh-medium education are underdeveloped.

The local authority provides an integrated, collaborative process of assessment, planning and monitoring, which facilitates early, timely and effective interventions for children and young people with ALN. The local authority tracks pupils' outcomes robustly and is using this information to monitor pupil progress effectively.

The early years service uses a range of purposeful systems and processes to support children and staff within early years and school settings. Officers support inclusion leads within all early years settings well. For example, they support referral processes and deliver a valuable early years professional learning programme to support practitioners.

Officers have implemented a post-16 transition protocol to ensure that learners are identified and supported to make a successful transition to post-16 provision. To support this, the authority leads a useful post-16 multi-agency group to support learners in their transition.

The local authority has highly effective strategic working relationships with a range of key partners. In collaboration with these partners, the authority has ensured that all stakeholders are fully involved in supporting children and young people with ALN.

Officers are reflective about the work of the ALN service and identify suitably its strengths and areas for development. They analyse appropriately outcomes for pupils with ALN and other relevant data. For example, the authority conducts regular

reviews to evaluate the quality of additional learning provision, monitor the efficiency of implemented strategies and to ensure compliance with their statutory duties.

Senior officers provide valuable information regularly to the education scrutiny committee about the progress of the authority in relation to ALN reform, as well as providing useful information about the work of different service areas.

Schools have to go through an onerous process currently to access funding to support individual pupils' ALN. Schools have to apply for funding through the local authority ALN panel. The local authority has recognised that this is a challenging process and is consulting with stakeholders about delegating funding annually to schools instead.

How effectively does the local authority plan for school reorganisation and federation arrangements?

The local authority has a robust, well-understood and effective strategic approach to consultation and decision-making about formal reorganisation of school or PRU provision. Officers prioritise reorganisation issues effectively. They plan ahead in a timely manner to reorganise the provision wherever this is necessary, following carefully the statutory consultation guidance. Considerations include, for example, repurposing and updating the local authority's estate, as well as making good use of Welsh Government funding streams to replace buildings that are dated or in poor condition.

The full process includes the authority's elected members suitably, for example through scrutiny committee and the cabinet. Officers offer pertinent support to the members where appropriate, to inform their discussions. For example, officers arranged for elected members to visit to a school in a neighbouring authority to envisage how a single building might accommodate both a Welsh-medium and an English-medium primary school together in practice, while each retaining a unique identity.

Officers make valuable use of shared demographic information and trends, such as live birth data and admissions to Caerphilly schools from outside the county boundary. These inform the local authority's strategies well and provide a breadth of potential issues for members to consider when planning for future reorganisation, for example concerning surplus places. In secondary schools particularly, these strategies have been very successful in reducing surplus places.

In primary schools, despite a few school closures, the proportion of surplus places has increased. Officers acknowledge that there is more work to do in order to evaluate fully the reasons for this increase. However, they are not afraid to make difficult decisions and present tough proposals to members, for example proposing the closure of schools where pupils numbers have dropped to become financially unsustainable. Nevertheless, officers have devised innovative and sustainable plans to reorganise and make good use of the spare classrooms and additional spaces that result from surplus places. For example, working with schools, they have utilised the excess capacity to create community hubs, and to accommodate satellite specialist provision classes. This wider, community use of the school sites has strengthened

the professional relationships between the range of providers and the families that the provision serves. In turn, this benefits the pupils.

A worthwhile example is the Welsh immersion centre that has been piloted this academic year at Ysgol Gymraeg Gilfach Fargoed. This provision has made purposeful use of excess space in the school, offering primary age pupils who want to join a Welsh-medium school the opportunity to acquire the Welsh language through immersion. It aims to support pupils to communicate confidently through the Welsh language, in preparation for education through the medium of Welsh.

Leaders also use reorganisation to promote the Welsh language for the youngest learners, promoting Welsh-medium play for pre-school children through Ti a Fi and Cylch Meithrin. This is particularly effective where reorganisation arrangements support the playgroup provision sharing a site with the nursery and school, encouraging seamless transition. Currently, around a quarter of nursery age pupils receive their early education through the medium of Welsh. An increasing proportion of these pupils go on to access Welsh-medium primary provision, often on the same site. The local authority has robust plans to use its place-shaping and capital funding to improve the capacity, facilities and condition of existing Welsh-medium schools, and to build new Welsh-medium schools as the demand for provision continues to grow.

There is a highly effective strategy across the local authority that supports schools' reorganisation as federations and collaborative, executive headteacher arrangements. There are currently four formal federations, where an executive headteacher leads two primary schools that share a governing body. These arrangements provide economies of scale by way of leadership, shared expertise and resource, in addition to opportunities for leaders at all levels to further develop their skills and build capacity across the two schools. In addition, where appropriate and whenever there is a leadership vacancy, officers encourage school governing bodies to consider collaboration. This informal arrangement provides many of the benefits of federations without the formal commitment. It provides opportunities to strengthen school improvement work and develop leadership capacity, while successfully addressing the potential difficulty of recruiting a new leader.

Cameo

When vacancies arise for school leaders, local authority officers encourage governing bodies to consider collaborative arrangements led by an executive headteacher. Currently, a third of primary schools across Caerphilly work together under the leadership of an executive headteacher, either as a federation or as a collaboration. There is a shared appreciation across the authority, including in schools, of the value and benefits of this strategy. In addition to the financial efficiencies, it promotes good working relationships between the authority, school leaders and governors, and provides worthwhile professional development opportunities for staff. The approach brings stability to schools and supports their sustainability, which has a positive impact on their pupils and their communities at a time of uncertainty. The use of executive headteachers has also been used effectively to support schools causing concern and secure swift improvements where necessary.

Leadership and management

Leaders in Caerphilly County Council have secured a strong and well-understood vision for education, 'pursuing excellence together' to secure 'better futures for all'. The leader of the council and the lead member for education are committed to securing the best outcomes for children and young people.

The corporate management team ensures that its high aspiration for education in local communities, including tackling the impact of poverty, is clearly reflected in the corporate plan. Strategic planning, including the strategic equality plan, takes good account of national and local priorities and there is a strong focus on achieving the aims of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. The local authority has a strong track record of managing challenging circumstances relating to education services and supporting people to accept difficult decisions that are in the best interests of children and young people.

Cameo

The Chief Education Officer inspires the team she leads, providing strategic, empathetic yet firm leadership. She sets high expectations for all and models exemplary professional behaviours. The senior team in the education service skilfully supports the Chief Education Officer and together they embody the 'Team Caerphilly' approach. They forge strong relationships with schools, settings and PRUs, where leaders feel well-supported, yet challenged to achieve their shared ambitions for success for learners. A notable cultural strength of the service is the way in which the Chief Education Officer leads by example in prioritising the well-being of staff in schools and within the service, whilst always ensuring that the needs of children and young people are at the heart of every decision. The Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services trusts the service to deliver against their priorities and sets out to remove any barriers to success. As a result, staff throughout the service feel valued and responsible, and are proud to promote the important message that no one should be constrained by circumstances.

Elected members generally have a good understanding of the work of the service and work purposefully alongside officers. Regular briefings and helpful reports enable them to have a beneficial understanding of important issues, such as the need to improve pupils' attendance, reduce exclusions and in particular school reorganisation proposals. This helps them to make informed decisions and to ensure that education remains a high priority for the council.

The Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee considers the work of the education service suitably. It is provided with worthwhile information that helps members to understand important decisions and their potential impacts. Pre-meetings help scrutiny members prepare for the formal scrutiny meetings but, whilst members ask pertinent question of officers, they do not routinely hold Cabinet to account effectively enough.

A culture of reflection, self-evaluation, and improvement permeates the work of the service. This work has had a positive impact for example on pupils' attendance,

strengthening processes for school improvement and in helping them make suitable progress in implementing their Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. There is a clear cycle of valuable activities that enable officers to monitor the work of the service and identify broad strengths and areas for development. This work is enhanced by useful 'challenge sessions', which include officers at all levels and senior leaders from schools. These sessions help the local authority to moderate their evaluations and for staff to challenge and support each other to improve. As a result, there is a strong sense of shared responsibility for improvement and senior officers have a strong understanding of all of the work of the service.

Officers gather a broad range of information, including data, to measure progress against the priorities set out in the education service improvement plan. This includes ensuring that the voice of young people and other stakeholders is carefully considered. This, along with the range of evaluation processes, helps officers to consider the effectiveness of evaluation of their services in a more holistic way. However, there is variation in the sharpness of evaluation across different services. In addition, the impact of actions on improving services or outcomes for young people is not always considered precisely enough. As a result, improvement priorities and related success criteria are not always specific enough to secure the greatest impact or consider fully value for money of services.

Officers value the support and challenge they get as part of performance management arrangements. This includes their regular line management meetings and reviews. However, the corporate performance management arrangements for individuals do not allow officers to identify precise enough areas for improvement and this makes it difficult to ensure that staff at all levels are held fully to account for the impact of their work. Despite this, the service has fostered a strong culture where professional learning is highly valued and where staff benefit from a wide range of opportunities to improve their skills. This includes providing officers with opportunities to develop their leadership, for example through shadowing opportunities and other programmes, approaches to coaching and mentoring and achieving professional qualifications. There is an expectation that officers share any learning to develop their colleagues' understanding and practice, for example through twilight sessions online.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding across the local authority and safeguarding is viewed as everybody's responsibility. The corporate safeguarding team provide the local authority with strong leadership. They ensure that all staff and elected members receive safeguarding training, which helps to ensure that they have a secure understanding of their responsibilities.

The education lead safeguarding officers provide outstanding support to providers. This includes beneficial training, timely safeguarding updates and bespoke support for individual providers. For example, officers provide training for secondary headteachers on how to quality assure the work of their school's designated safeguarding person. When needed, officers are available promptly to deal with safeguarding concerns or to provide advice for school staff. School leaders value highly the support of education safeguarding lead officers and the difference that it makes to successfully safeguard their pupils.

The education lead safeguarding officers audit safeguarding practice in schools every three years. They undertake a thorough evaluation through on-site visits and meetings with groups of stakeholders including pupils and a range of staff. Where there are shortcomings in a provider's practice, officers work closely with school leaders to address the issues.

Safeguarding officers regularly collect a range of data from schools to monitor patterns of restrictive physical intervention and discriminatory incidents. They use their evaluations to provide additional training for all schools or to work with individual schools where there are recurring incidents.

The local authority has prioritised its revenue and capital resources for education. Schools' budgeted expenditure per pupil has increased year on year in recent years and is above the Welsh Average for 2023-2024. The authority also increased its overall budgeted net revenue expenditure for education by 8.8% for 2023-2024.

The local authority has prioritised school builds through its Place Shaping Programme and is looking at how it can maximise its assets. As part of an ongoing programme, the authority is in the process of carrying out condition surveys of its schools to provide more up-to-date and accurate information to inform its planning.

The local authority understands its financial pressures in education. Overall, the Council underspent its education budget in 2023-2024, but this masks an overspend of £1.4 million in home-to-school transport. It has a specific project focusing on home-to-school transport as part of its Mobilising Team Caerphilly transformation programme, but is also exploring more immediate actions to help reduce the overspend while minimising the impact on learners. Officers use financial and other data effectively, including some comparative financial data, to inform their financial planning.

Overall, schools' balances have reduced in recent years from £17.2 million in 2021-2022 to £5.3m in 2023-2024. This is a similar pattern to other authorities in Wales. The number of schools carrying forward a deficit position has increased from eight in 2022-2023 to 21 in 2023-2024, but there are also 47 schools with a surplus balance over 5%. The local authority has arrangements in place to monitor schools' balances and to work with schools to manage deficits and surpluses in a pragmatic and considered way, including more intensive support and challenge for those of greater concern.

The local authority's 2024-2025 budget included growth of just over £5.2 million for schools. It has estimated cost pressures for schools of over £8.2 million. Recognising its broader financial challenges, the local authority identified £1 million of savings from the education service and £3 million for schools (2%) as part of its budget strategy for 2024-2025. The rationale for this was clearly explained to the School Budget Forum and schools. The local authority has provided indicative savings targets for schools for the next two years to help them plan.

Officers work openly and constructively with the School Budget Forum. Support from the finance team is well-regarded by the School Budget Forum. Members of the School Budget Forum are aware of the local authority's overall financial position and budget strategy.

The local authority provides a comprehensive range of service level agreements and there is a high level of take up of services from schools. Feedback on these services is largely positive and the local authority is taking action to respond to areas of concern identified through its survey.

Whilst aspects of the school funding formula have been reviewed, the local authority last reviewed it comprehensively in 2018-2019. The local authority is in the process of undertaking a line-by-line review of the formula and the School Budget Forum is involved in this review.

The local authority is currently consulting with school and PRU leaders on delegating the funding for additional learning needs with the aim of reducing spend on administration and providing more autonomy to schools. However, the consultation has been going on for some time and no final decision has been made yet.

Whilst there are arrangements at an officer level to monitor the financial position of the local authority and education service, Cabinet members do not receive budget monitoring reports through the year, and scrutiny committees receive reports for information only. For 2024-2025, the local authority is improving its reporting arrangements to members to enable regular oversight and scrutiny of its financial position. The finance manager for education is attending the Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee in July to update members on the financial position.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consulted the local authority on the local inspection questions to be used during the inspection, based on the authority's self-evaluation, strategic plans and relevant data held by Estyn
- analysed the outcomes from open questionnaires, including the views of learners, parents, school staff and governors, local authority staff, regional consortium staff, elected members and general public
- carried out a preliminary visit to the local authority to meet with a range of relevant partners to education services, such as learner representatives, headteachers and governors, and leaders from statutory and third sector agencies working with children and young people

During the inspection, inspectors:

- met with the leader of the council, elected members responsible for education services, elected members responsible for the scrutiny of education services, the chief executive, the director of education, other leaders and managers in education services, other relevant staff in the local authority, the managing director of the regional consortium for school improvement and other relevant staff from the regional consortium
- looked closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- considered the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinised a variety of documents, including information on learner outcomes, information on the performance of schools and other education settings, including information from the regional consortium for school improvement, minutes from a range of meetings, reports presented to council or scrutiny, information relating to the safeguarding of learners and other information relevant to the local authority's education services held by Estyn

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- reviewed the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, standardise and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provided a draft copy of the report for the local authority to note any concerns with factual accuracy, and made amendments where necessary

Case study: Supporting learners with additional learning needs in mainstream providers

Context and background to the effective or innovative practice

During the inspection, inspectors considered this local inspection question: How well is the local authority supporting the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018?

Description of nature of strategy or activity

In Caerphilly local authority, staff at Trinity Fields Special School, including Caerphilly Autistic Spectrum Service based at the school, provided an extensive range of high-quality specialist support to mainstream schools and settings. The service also provides direct support to the families of pupils with autism.

Trinity Fields School has nine satellite classes across the borough for pupils with high level needs. Pupils in the satellite classes are on the roll of the school but benefit from integration with pupils in mainstream settings. A recent development is the satellite class at Coleg y Cymoedd for post 16 learners. Pupils in this satellite benefit from the range of courses on offer at the college but also receive specialist support from Trinity Fields staff.

Trinity Fields School also provides a range of support for local authority specialist classes across the borough. Working jointly with the educational psychology service, staff at the school have provided support and training for the assessment of pupils with ALN which is helping to promote high quality provision to meet the needs of young people.

What impact has this work had on provision and learners' standards?

The service provides support to over 2,500 pupils with autism. It has been instrumental in building the capacity of mainstream schools to support pupils with autism, for example through creating low sensory environments and delivering strategies to support individual pupils.

The satellite classes are important in enabling pupils with ALN to receive their education within their local community. The satellite class at the college is successful in raising the aspirations of young people with ALN to achieve their future goals.

The support for local authority specialist classes helps staff in these classes to have a common understanding of pupils' needs. This is raising expectations and improving the progress that pupils with ALN make in these classes. The joint moderation of IDPs and work scrutiny is promotes high quality provision that meets individual pupils' needs.

The extensive, high-quality range of outreach support and professional development provided by Trinity Fields School in partnership with the local authority has a valuable impact on the quality of additional learning provision across the county and the progress that learners make.

How have you shared your good practice?

The local authority has shared the good practice at relevant national meetings.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (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.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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