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

Report following monitoring
Local authority causing significant concern

Powys County Council
Powys County Hall
Spa Road East
Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 5LG

Date of visit: October 2021

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh.

Outcome of visit

Powys County Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the most recent core inspection.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is removing the authority from the category of local authorities causing significant concern.

Progress since the last inspection

Recommendation 1: Improve standards in secondary schools, and especially the performance of more able learners

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 September 2021. 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. It also affected most other data that inspectors consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations. Despite not being able to report on outcomes, we have evaluated the actions of the local authority to support the improvement of standards in secondary schools.

During the pandemic, the local authority launched their 'Powys Secondary School Improvement Strategy'. This strategy focuses on driving up the quality of provision and leadership across all secondary schools. Through this work, officers provide secondary schools with valuable support across a comprehensive range of aspects such as skill development and collaborative working. There are suitable references throughout the strategy to standards and to the progress of groups of pupils, including the more able. Currently, many of the success criteria in the action plan for this work are insufficiently specific or measurable and as a result it makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy in detail.

Throughout this challenging time, officers and school improvement advisers have worked with schools virtually and, where possible, in person to implement elements of the strategy, always mindful of the capacity and wellbeing of school leaders. School improvement advisers have developed stronger relationships with schools and other teams across the service. In particular there are now beneficial links with the additional learning needs team. This has helped school improvement advisers to offer a balance of challenge and support and prioritise standards and progress appropriately.

School improvement advisers engage constructively with schools in need of support or in an Estyn follow-up category. This includes participation in the pilot multi agency approach alongside partners such as the Welsh Government and Estyn. Recently, a

Powys secondary school has demonstrated sufficient progress to be removed from a statutory category of follow-up.

The local authority continues to offer a wide range of engaging professional learning opportunities, many with a strong focus on national priorities including a Curriculum for Wales. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this area of work on standards across the secondary sector in Powys.

Recommendation 2: Improve the evaluation, planning and coordination of provision for learners with special educational needs and other pupils who may require extra support

Since the core inspection, the local authority has developed and communicated a clear vision to support its learners with special educational needs (SEN)[1] and other pupils who may require extra support. It has been successful in developing an integrated and inclusive education system where learners have access to a specialist education that meets their needs, either in mainstream or specialist provision. Officers understand their areas of responsibility well and share a passion and commitment to improve provision and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs.

The local authority has developed a co-ordinated, strategic approach to improve provision and support for schools and PRUs. Officers, central team staff and partners work effectively in 'cluster' teams within geographical areas in Powys. They know their schools well and provide relevant support to schools, pupils and families. This has resulted in improved opportunities for children and young people with SEN and other pupils who may require extra support, despite the impacts of the pandemic.

Overall senior leaders within schools and settings feel well supported by local authority additional learning needs officers and central service staff. Officers communicate regularly with schools and settings, produce clear guidance and pathways, and provide support and advice through purposeful weekly bulletins, meetings and valuable online resources. School leaders appreciate the authority's single point of access for referrals into the Schools Service through the Powys Inclusion Panel (PIP) and the Early Years Inclusion Panel, as well as the bilingual 'Tyfu' platform and gateway. This platform is a very useful and easily accessible resource and ensures that SEN documentation and referrals are all available in one convenient access point.

The local authority has developed a valuable offer of professional learning for schools and settings. A few teachers in special schools and specialist centres have been funded to provide post-graduate diplomas in SEN provision. This expertise is shared beneficially with other providers. Other staff in special schools have undertaken professional learning to ensure a high-level of understanding of need. A county-wide training programme has also been established, so that teaching and support staff in all schools are able to develop skills in relation to a broad range of SEN, including autistic spectrum condition, speech, language and communication difficulties, specific learning difficulties and social, emotional and behaviour

[1] The use of the term special educational needs (SEN) preceded the introduction of additional learning needs education tribunal act (ALNET). The findings of the inspection team refer therefore to those pupils with SEN as per the recommendation.

difficulties. The local authority is beginning to develop a body of evidence around effective practice for supporting pupils with SEN and is using this to support schools across the region.

The local authority makes effective use of a range of data and information as part of its evaluation of services. Officers reflect on strategies that have worked well and those that have been less successful in terms of their impact on learners. For example, following a recent positive behaviour training event, nearly all delegates have made changes to their practice as a direct result of the professional learning. Many schools and settings report that they have already started to see a positive impact on practice including an improved consistency of approach from staff as well as a reduction in challenging behaviours and exclusions.

Recommendation 3: 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

Senior leaders within the authority provide a clear sense of direction for education services. The Chief Executive, the Leader, the Portfolio Holder for Education and the Director of Education have provided robust leadership and have secured notable positive change for education in Powys. Their impact in improving the quality of education services and their rigour, scrutiny and challenge about the performance of the authority's services is good.

Since the inspection, the authority has maintained its momentum in addressing the recommendations despite the additional challenges brought by the pandemic. Overall, leaders have worked well with stakeholders and partners to make strong progress against all recommendations.

There have been positive developments in leadership structures at the local authority including key appointments to the education service. Recently, the interim Head of Education was appointed to the permanent post of Director of Education. She provides a clear sense of direction to the work of the education service and has built strong working relationships with schools. This has helped to accelerate improvement in key areas under difficult circumstances.

The authority continues to focus on increasing the leadership capacity within its education service, including through the support of external advisers. The Chief Executive and the Portfolio Holder for Education are keen that the transition of knowledge and skills from the external advisers to the officers within the authority continues in the short term, so that internal capacity is strengthened further to ensure sustainability of improvements.

There is greater distributed leadership within the education service, including improved joint working within the service and with other local authority departments. This has enabled officers to increase their leadership capacity and their ownership of actions and approaches to address areas of concern. For example, officers other than senior leaders have opportunities to present information and evidence to the Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee and answer questions about their areas of responsibility.

Generally, the quality, accuracy and usefulness of the reports and briefings provided by officers to the Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee have improved. By now, leaders have a better overview of all services across the local authority and can compare and challenge services more effectively. The scrutiny process is now more robust, and members question and analyse decisions in much more depth. Discussions within the committee are relevant and suitably challenging and provide appropriate scrutiny to the work and the ambitions of the local authority.

The interaction between the Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee, the Portfolio Holder for Education and the education service is good. Together, they work well, and, as a result, there is more effective scrutiny and challenge about performance of the authority's services. The Portfolio Holder for Education is passionate about improving education in the authority and is a strong catalyst for promoting positive change. When necessary, for example about school transformation, the Cabinet has taken difficult decisions in a timely manner following a rigorous and open process of considering evidence, advice and undertaking consultation.

Recommendation 4: 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

The local authority has worked well with a range of stakeholders to develop a purposeful and ambitious vision to ensure that its education provision meets the needs of all learners now and in the future. The vision provides the basis for Powys' Transforming Education Strategy. This is a ten-year strategy, which includes key strategic aims and objectives for improving learner entitlement and opportunities, Welsh-medium provision, ALN provision and post-16 provision.

A strong governance structure in relation to the transformation agenda now ensures that senior leaders, Council Members and other officers have access to a useful range of information and data to make informed strategic decisions relating to school organisation. Effective communication across the authority's departments now ensures a strong awareness by officers of the key strategic objectives of the transformation strategy. This enables them to contribute well to support the work of the education transformation team and other working groups by providing advice and expertise. For example, the Welsh in Education Team have worked well with officers from the corporate and education transformation teams, human resources, transport services and health and safety to plan for a pilot Welsh language immersion project to support learners. Since the core inspection, members of the Cabinet have progressed successfully school organisation proposals following the consultation process, which reflects their commitment to the transformation strategy. In addition, members of the Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee have provided suitable challenge when required, in order to ensure that the Cabinet's decisions are robust.

Since the core inspection, the local authority has embarked on an ambitious programme of school organisation proposals based on the Transforming Education Strategy. These proposals have included the opening of a new all-age school, the merger of a number of primary schools and the closure of small rural schools, as well as changes to the language category of schools. Officers and relevant members of the council have engaged with parents, pupils, staff and governors to discuss the

proposals and allay concerns. They have considered appropriately the sensitivities and conflicting views of key stakeholders during the consultation period.

The local authority is also working with representatives from secondary schools and other stakeholders to co-construct purposeful post-16 provision to improve learner entitlement across Powys. Although this is at an early stage, the local authority is working with partners in further education colleges as well as schools and colleges in neighbouring local authorities to provide a bespoke bilingual academic and vocational learner entitlement for all learners, regardless of their location.

The local authority has recently published a Welsh in Education Strategy consultation document, in which it outlines its plans on the development of the Welsh language education provision over the next ten years. This strategy aligns well with the local authority's strategy for transforming education in Powys and its vision for Welsh medium education. It aims to ensure that learners in all 13 areas of the local authority will have suitable access to Welsh-medium education and bilingualism from birth. The local authority now has a better understanding of which areas require support to help meet the demand for Welsh-medium education and how to stimulate growth in the use of the language over time. The plan includes establishing new Welsh-medium early years provision, primary and secondary schools as well as supporting learners to develop their Welsh language skills in English-medium schools. In addition, the local authority has recognised the need to develop the workforce to be able to support learners through the medium of Welsh. It also recognises the need to establish high-quality 'trochi'(immersion) provision to support learners who move into Powys that can't speak Welsh, and also for those who choose to move to a Welsh-medium school from an English-medium school or stream. The local authority has also successfully reviewed their Welsh-medium additional learning needs provision and has plans to improve the current services available to learners across Powys.

Recommendation 5: Continue to improve the quality of financial management in schools and take appropriate action to address schools with significant deficit budgets

The authority has made good progress to strengthen financial management arrangements since the inspection. A focus on clear, regular, consistent communication and co-operation, building on the 'team around the school' approach, has improved relationships between senior leaders, finance staff and schools This includes finance staff attending regular briefings for schools during the pandemic to provide advice and guidance about additional funding sources and to answer questions. The authority has also prepared a suite of guidance notes for topics such as value added tax (VAT), grants eligibility and expenditure coding for schools. The authority's benchmarking data is welcomed by schools and officers are planning further developments to support the budget setting process for 2022-2023.

Local authority officers are delivering training for headteachers, governors and school staff in shorter, focused online sessions to align with the school day. The authority recognises the need to further develop financial management training for chairs of governing bodies and those on school finance committees.

Collaborative working groups have reviewed how to further strengthen arrangements. For example, the local authority is developing a cluster business manager model to

provide support and guidance to schools and is also considering the funding formulae to support fair distribution of the budget to schools. The authority is taking time to carefully assess whether any changes made are sustainable.

Schools and officers worked together to design a new funding formula for the primary sector. They are currently consulting on the proposed funding formula and plan to use it from April 2022. At the same time, work has progressed to review the funding formula for the secondary and special schools alongside the transformation plans.

The authority recognises that cumulative school balances remain a concern. However, schools work well with officers to bring in-year budgets into balance and halt the growth of cumulative deficits. Monthly monitoring and updating of budgets, together with a clear, understood process for swift escalation to senior managers, means that concerns are quickly identified and considered. The authority appropriately uses warning notices, recovery plans and removal of financial delegation to strengthen financial management at schools causing most concern.

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