



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

Ceredigion County Council

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by

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

About Ceredigion County Council

Ceredigion County Council has a total population of approximately 71,500. The local authority maintains 14 nursery resources within schools, in addition to education in 20 playgroups. There are 36 primary schools, four secondary schools and one all-age school that provides education for pupils between 3 and 16 years old and two all-age schools that provide education for pupils between 3 and 19 years old. The authority also maintains one pupil referral unit across two sites.

The Chief Executive began in post in September 2017.

At the time of the inspection, the position of Chief Education Officer was being undertaken through secondment. Responsibility for the Schools Service and the Lifelong Learning Service is shared between two Corporate Lead Officers. The Leader of the Council has been in the role since May 2022 and the Cabinet Member for Schools, Lifelong Learning and Skills began in post in September 2022.

The local authority's last inspection was conducted in 2013. Ceredigion County Council has established a partnership with Powys County Council, namely Mid Wales Education Partnership (MWEPP), which supports the improvement of their schools after the ERW consortium ceased to exist.

In 2023-2024, the local authority's net education budget is around £76,568,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2023-24 is £5,482, which is higher than the Welsh average of £5,386.

Inspectors consider a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating the outcomes and quality of education services. They consider this information alongside information about the national population. Here is some of the most useful information about children and young people in Ceredigion:

- Over a three-year period, 17% of pupils between the ages of 5 and 15 have been eligible for free school meals, which is lower than the Welsh average of 23%
- Thirty-nine per cent (39%) of pupils aged 5 and over are fluent in Welsh, which is higher than the Welsh average of 15%
- Eleven per cent (11%) of pupils between the ages of 5 and 15 are from ethnic minorities, which is lower than the Welsh average of 14%
- A total of 130 children are looked after by the local authority
- Fifteen per cent (15%) of pupils between the ages of 5 and 15 have additional learning needs
- Three per cent (3%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 speak English as an additional language

Summary

Ceredigion authority has ensured stable, high-quality educational provision for learners over an extended period. This is mainly due to robust leadership; clear and purposeful strategies and ambitions; and close co-operation among the authority's officers, elected members, schools and other partners. The authority has a good track record of maintaining and improving its provision and achieving good outcomes for the children and young people of Ceredigion.

The authority's arrangements in terms of developing the Welsh language are a significant strength, where several aspects of excellence can be seen among its provision and practices. The local authority's education services promote positive behaviour and good attendance in its schools and put valuable provision in place to encourage pupils to continue to engage with their education. However, the authority is alert to the ongoing challenges in terms of improving attendance to pre-pandemic levels.

The authority supports its schools and settings to improve teaching and leadership effectively. The authority's improvement advisers have a strong knowledge of their schools and data is used shrewdly to challenge and support schools. This is an extremely robust and purposeful feature. There is a robust vision and provision to meet the needs of pupils with additional learning needs. Being inclusive and providing a resource within pupils' local communities is a commendable aspect of the authority's mindset. There is a range of beneficial specialist services to support schools to meet pupils' learning needs.

On the whole, leaders identify strengths and areas for improvement thoroughly and their means of planning and ensuring improvement has a clear impact, as can be seen in the several extremely positive aspects referred to in this report. However, in a few aspects, such as identifying actions for schools and forward-planning and measuring the effect of specific provision, self-evaluation and improvement planning are not always as incisive.

Recommendations

- R1 Continue to improve attendance within the authority's schools
- R2 Develop self-evaluation and planning for improvement processes further so that they focus on the impact that services have on outcomes

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.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare a case study on its work in relation to developing the Welsh language, to be disseminated on Estyn's website.

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 from March 2020 until March 2022. 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.

Over time, the outcomes of school inspections in Ceredigion are strong. Between September 2017 and March 2020, we inspected 24 schools and settings. This includes 15 primary schools, two all-age schools, one pupil referral unit and six non-maintained nursery settings. In many of these inspections, the performance of the school or institution was judged to be good or better. One of the primary schools and one of the all-age schools inspected were judged to be in need of the Estyn review level of follow-up activity. One non-maintained setting was judged to be in need of follow-up activity. As a result of swift improvements, these providers were removed from the follow-up category shortly after the core inspection.

Since February 2022, when we resumed school inspections after the pandemic, 21 settings have been inspected. This includes 14 primary schools, three secondary schools and four non-maintained nursery settings. None of these required follow-up activity. In each of these inspections, it was judged that at least many pupils made sound progress or better during their time at school. It was judged that many pupils with additional learning needs also made sound progress.

Before the pandemic, the performance of the secondary and all-age schools in Ceredigion in the indicators at the end of key stage 4 was fairly similar to that expected. During this period, the performance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals was, overall, higher than the national averages.

During the inspection cycle between September 2017 and March 2020, evaluations on well-being and attitudes to learning were good or better in all school inspections. In the inspections that have been conducted since Estyn resumed school inspections in 2022, judgements on well-being have been positive. Overall, a common feature of these reports is that most pupils behave well and nearly all feel safe at school.

A significant decrease in school attendance rates has been seen across Wales as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authority's internal data suggests that attendance in primary and secondary schools for the period 2022-2023 rose

compared to the previous year. The unverified data shows that this trend has been maintained this year. However, overall, school attendance rates remain lower than before the pandemic. There has not been a permanent exclusion in the authority for over ten years. Over the three years to 2022, the rate of fixed-term exclusions was lower than the national average in terms of temporary exclusions. The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training is low.

Members of the youth council reflect conscientiously on issues that are important to the authority's young people and set suitable actions to address these aspects. They have high levels of understanding of current affairs that influence them within the authority and they voice their opinions and influence the authority's work and ideas effectively. For example, they commissioned a film to warn about the dangers of vaping.

Education services

How well does the local authority support its schools and settings to improve teaching and leadership?

Ceredigion County Council has a robust vision for its school improvement service. Officers work effectively to try to realise the vision of ensuring the best possible experiences for all children and young people in Ceredigion and there is a strong focus on developing learning, teaching and pupils' standards of well-being. The authority places a clear priority on developing leadership capacity within schools and the service to respond to national recruitment challenges. The strategy includes the professional learning programme, secondments and the activities of the school improvement team. For example, workshops to jointly assure the quality of teaching and learning in schools include opportunities for leaders to contribute at several levels.

Ceredigion's support advisers have a supportive and positive working relationship with the authority's schools. They work productively with schools, using and analysing a wide range of information and data to develop their knowledge of their schools. This information is used to inform the discussions of the school improvement team, and where key issues are identified, purposeful proactive support is provided for schools to address these issues. No schools within the authority are currently in need of follow-up following Estyn inspections. In addition, over time, there are no schools in which a pre-warning notice from the authority has had to be used.

Following purposeful self-evaluation and reflection, the service has begun to adapt its arrangements to refine its school improvement work. As a result, work to strengthen the support and challenge provided to schools through the work of the support advisers is developing purposefully. A series of beneficial workshops is held with individual schools to acquire information about their work and provide support. These workshops follow agreed agendas that respond to national and local priorities. Advisers also provide schools with valuable support which contributes to joint assurance activities. They support self-evaluation processes, such as joint lesson observations, joint scrutiny of books, discussing with pupils and providing schools with support. On this basis, they consider the effect of provision on pupils' standards and well-being. However, support staff do not always identify actions for schools incisively enough. In these cases, the success criteria are not sufficiently precise

when considering the impact of the support provided on learners' standards and well-being.

The authority uses appropriate procedures to identify the priorities and professional learning needs of staff in schools. Purposeful support is provided for school staff through the work of the service's advisers and wider partners. A valuable range of relevant professional learning opportunities is provided through the authority's 'Gweithredu Gwelliant' website. There is an extensive and robust offer to develop pedagogy and assessment in schools, including a rich range of resources and videos of a high standard to model good teaching. The childcare and non-maintained sector team provides commendable professional learning support for settings. The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan is at the heart of the service's work with a strong emphasis on providing high quality bilingual resources. The authority is beginning to facilitate appropriate opportunities for schools to work together as clusters. Purposeful consideration is given to how professional learning provision is evaluated and it is beginning to develop systems and processes to evaluate the impact of professional learning on pupils' standards and well-being.

The authority works purposefully in partnership with a neighbouring authority through Mid Wales Education Partnership (MWEPP) to provide professional learning, for example through leadership and support programmes for newly qualified teachers. As part of the partnership, the authority is beginning to develop beneficial opportunities for schools to share effective practices through 'Expanding Horizons' events, where schools are given an opportunity to visit a provider where good practice has been identified. There are also valuable interaction opportunities for subject leaders in secondary schools through county networks. The authority is aware of the need to develop professional learning provision further for some secondary subjects and is planning purposefully to meet these needs.

Cameo

The authority's data team provides comprehensive data about pupils' performance in external examinations, including how they have performed when answering individual questions. This item-level data is used to inform analytical discussions in post-14 subject network meetings. This enables subject leaders to identify strengths and areas for development in pupils' performance and, by doing so, identify where there is strong practice and aspects of teaching that needs to improve. As a result, the sharing of effective practices and beneficial school-to-school work is facilitated.

The local authority provides governors with valuable guidance and support, including through a governors' forum. There is a dedicated professional learning programme to develop governors as critical friends. For example, governors contribute purposefully to schools' self-evaluation processes such as learning walks and scrutiny of pupils' work.

How well do the local authority's education services promote positive behaviour and good attendance in its schools?

The local authority promotes positive behaviour in its schools effectively. The authority's clear vision, which is based on ensuring inclusion, is realised by working successfully across the authority's services and with external agencies. There is also a close and effective working relationship between the authority, schools and the pupil referral unit.

The authority's staff work with schools to support their pupils effectively by training staff to implement specific interventions. For example, they provide beneficial training to ensure that expertise in supporting pupils' emotional needs is available in all schools. They also use technology extremely effectively to raise staff awareness of experiences that can lead to challenging behaviours. The Well-being and Behaviour Forum is an effective means for key staff to share practices among the authority's schools. Recently, the forum has begun to establish links with providers and experts from outside the authority and leaders consider this knowledge when developing their practice. They provide beneficial opportunities for leaders and staff to observe effective practice, for example by visiting the pupil referral unit.

The authority provides information for schools in an accessible manner that enables them to identify pupils who may be at risk of being vulnerable. This helps schools to prioritise additional support at school, where appropriate. When support is required, there are clear and graduated steps that are understandable to all stakeholders to receive support from the authority's inclusion officers. These officers provide useful outreach support to develop the skills of staff in mainstream settings. For example, they work with school staff to evaluate and refine the support available to pupils to attend Hafan provisions in secondary schools. Pupils value this pastoral support which promotes their well-being.

The local authority has a good range of additional provision to promote positive attitudes to learning. These include nurture facilities in settings across the authority which support pupils to develop appropriate social skills. A successful pupil referral unit provides valuable experiences for pupils who have found it difficult to cope with mainstream education. Staff evaluate the impact of provision on an increase in pupils' confidence and well-being over time. Other young people benefit from access to an alternative curriculum and this is provided through the authority's Hyfforddiant Ceredigion Training facility. This encourages pupils to continue to engage with education while being given purposeful opportunities to complete accredited vocational courses. This contributes beneficially to the low number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) within the authority.

The authority places a strong emphasis on regular school attendance. The inclusion team uses the authority's comprehensive information management system purposefully to identify pupils and groups of learners whose attendance is a cause for concern. Officers work effectively with school staff and other services to intervene, where appropriate. For example, the internal counselling service is used effectively to support pupils' well-being and develop their willingness to attend school. Another example is the resource pack prepared by the education psychologists' team to support pupils who avoid schools on emotional grounds. Since the pandemic,

attendance rates at the authority's schools have improved, although they remain lower than the last figures published before the pandemic in most cases.

How well does the local authority meet the needs of pupils with ALN?

The authority has a clear vision for supporting pupils with ALN in an inclusive manner within their local communities in most cases. Additional learning provision is provided fully bilingually and this is a notable strength. The ALN team ensures that pupils' individual needs are a priority in their work and robust co-operation across services ensures a cohesive and person-centred approach. The service succeeds in supporting the needs of nearly all pupils and only a very few pupils receive specialist out-of-county provision.

The authority is making good progress towards implementing the requirements and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and many pupils with ALN have been transferred to the new arrangements in line with the national implementation timetable. Through the council's website, individual school websites and the 'Teacher Centre' digital platform, staff communicate well and share timely, bilingual information for all stakeholders in a manageable way. The number of appeals to the tribunal is very limited, partly as a result of partnerships and strong relationships with families. ALN leaders have robust multi-agency processes to identify individual learning needs and ensure suitable provision to respond to these needs. For example, positive work through the 'Referral Scheme' ensures that pre-school aged children receive valuable support and transition smoothly to the next steps in their education.

Through its advisory and outreach teams, the authority provides a range of beneficial specialist services to support schools to meet pupils' learning needs. This includes a variety of materials, training and support for schools. The ALN team listens to the voice and opinions of schools and stakeholders and works closely with headteachers and ALN co-ordinators to agree on priorities and training programmes. Recently, it has identified the need to work more closely with the inclusion service to review its provision to support pupils with profound behavioural needs.

The authority provides specialist centres across the county, mainly on school sites, to provide specialist support for pupils with more profound and complex ALN. There are robust procedures to deal with each case individually and manage access and movement between provisions effectively. In line with the authority's vision, the centres plan purposefully to create valuable opportunities for pupils to integrate with their peers in their mainstream schools. For the most profound older pupils, the '*Camu 'Mlaen*' integrated plan provides beneficial opportunities to develop their independent skills and prepare them to move to the next stage in their lives. In a very few areas, there is not a clear enough strategy or sufficiently purposeful forward planning to provide specialist support locally for the pupils with the most profound needs.

Recently, the ALN team has begun to resume its arrangements for monitoring and supporting provision. It gathers and manages information through its central systems to check compliance and ensure consistency across its schools. However, the authority does not have a strategic enough overview based on detailed quality assurance activity which focuses on impact to plan for improvement.

How effective are the local authority's arrangements for developing the Welsh language?

The main aim of Ceredigion local authority is to ensure that pupils are confident bilingual learners. The corporate strategy sets a purposeful direction for the Council's work in developing the Welsh language, by ensuring that the language has a prominent place in the work of all departments. Officers work together effectively across departments to realise the vision for the Welsh language. Emphasis is placed on the corporate strategic plan to address and develop the Welsh language and culture across all aspects of life in Ceredigion, using the four main themes: learning, living, belonging and succeeding, as a foundation.

A strong feature of the authority's work is the successful co-operation between officers from the culture department and the teams in the education department to support the Welsh language and Welshness. The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) is ambitious and clear in terms of the authority's objectives to develop the Welsh language, and officers across the schools service and other departments of the authority are committed to realising the plan's objectives and targets. For example, the non-maintained nursery settings and foundation learning support team works with leaders and practitioners in English-medium early education and care settings to develop the use of the Welsh language within their institutions.

Officers in the schools service are very aware of the importance of the authority's wider strategies to support the objectives of the WESP. For example, they use the findings of the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment to forward plan for the growth of the Welsh language in specified areas. A variety of specific fora are also used purposefully to discuss progress against the WESP and the development of the Welsh language across Ceredigion, which allows stakeholders to voice their opinions and offer ideas for the future.

The authority is making significant progress in line with the timeline in its WESP, including laying a firm foundation for three-year-old children to receive Welsh-medium education. This includes changing the language medium of five schools in response to the authority's ambitious aspiration to ensure that all pupils receive Welsh-medium education up to the age of seven.

Cameo

The expertise of members of the Welsh Language Support Team and the culture department is used very effectively to support schools that change their language medium. They provide very beneficial professional development for staff through their website, '*Câr-di-laith*', in addition to ensuring helpful support that responds very successfully to the specific needs of the schools' stakeholders. Officers work purposefully with local partners, such as Learn Welsh Ceredigion and Menter Iaith Ceredigion (Cered), to provide opportunities for parents to learn Welsh and take part in fun creative sessions. This contributes very well to preparations to change the language medium of foundation learning within English-medium primary schools.

A strong emphasis is placed on moving schools along the language continuum. Officers use their experience and the lessons learned from previous consultations sensibly to support this process. The Welsh language support team also provides intensive support for primary school pupils who are new to the language in three language centres. Similarly, they provide resources and funding to support pupils who need support to learn or improve their language skills in Welsh-medium secondary schools. A very significant feature of the Welsh language support team's work is the range of excellent resources they create to support teachers and pupils to develop their skills. For example, they have published a series of more than one hundred reading books and resources to support pupils who are new to the Welsh language, in addition to organising a conference and beneficial resources through the '*Datgloi Darllen*' reading campaign in response to national and local priorities.

A notable strength of the authority's work is the support for pupils with ALN that is available through the medium of Welsh. Officers also work very effectively with partners and other agencies to support parents who educate their children at home. For example, they work with Theatr Felinfach to provide beneficial opportunities for pupils to join creative outdoor projects, which foster their awareness of Welsh culture and the Welsh language.

Over time, the Welsh Language Charter activities promote the Welsh language successfully and encourage beneficial opportunities for pupils to use the language outside the classroom. Officers work effectively with colleagues and other partners to support this work. For example, the music service works with schools and other partners to provide a concert in the town of Cardigan to promote the Welsh language, culture and music.

Leadership and management

The authority's leaders place a clear emphasis on ensuring first class educational provision in Ceredigion. This vision is conveyed in the Council's Corporate Strategic Plan, which includes an objective of 'providing the best start in life and enabling learning at all ages'. The chief executive, corporate director and education service leaders work very effectively as a team to achieve the authority's ambitions. Together, they provide robust strategic leadership that has ensured stable educational provision of a high standard for learners over an extended period. Through this robust leadership, the authority has a good track record of maintaining and improving its provision and achieving good outcomes for the children and young people of Ceredigion.

Elected members, including the cabinet member and chair of the education scrutiny panel, promote the vision purposefully and successfully. The education portfolio holder has a very strong knowledge of the challenges and successes across education provision within the authority. He engages excellently with relevant partners and stakeholders, which includes regular visits to all of the authority's schools to listen to the priorities of headteachers and staff. He is passionate about education in Ceredigion and upholds the vision clearly. As a result, stakeholders such as headteachers and governors have confidence that the authority's leaders listen to their opinions and consider their views when tailoring services for the better.

The quality of the relationships the local authority has developed with its schools and other settings means that there is very strong trust, in addition to mature discussions about the challenges faced by the education system. The authority's leaders and officers work very effectively with key partners to provide services for the children and young people of Ceredigion.

The Chief Executive, the portfolio holder, senior officers and elected members understand the challenges that face the education service well. There is a culture of encouraging everyone to reflect and pay ongoing attention to challenges that arise and value is placed on innovation and finding resourceful solutions to challenges that are specific to the authority. An example of this is the way in which they work closely with neighbouring authorities to form the Mid Wales Education Partnership (MWEP) to co-operate on some aspects to support and meet the needs of schools, learners and practitioners across mid Wales.

Cameo

There is a culture of working creatively and meeting challenges resourcefully within the authority, with innovative responses at times. Leaders are willing to trial new ideas and are keen to create an organisation that is progressive when it comes to important issues that align with their core priorities and principles. Good examples of these innovations include the development of an internal system for tracking information about pupils and their robust and measured response to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the whole, leaders encourage their staff, schools and key partners to use their strengths and expertise to create unique solutions to deal with local issues, which demonstrate the principles and willingness of leaders to try and to take sensible risks.

In addition to the corporate strategic plan, which provides a clear and purposeful direction for the authority's work, there are a number of other plans and strategies that highlight the authority's ambition in important areas. For example, the authority is beginning to have a positive effect in terms of addressing its aspirations within the WESP. There are also sensible plans and strategies in place which highlight the authority's intention to reduce the impact of poverty and disadvantage.

Self-evaluation, monitoring and quality assurance process are embedded well and progress against key objectives is evaluated regularly. There are structured business plans at all levels which highlight logical steps towards achieving the aims of the corporate strategy. However, measures against some of these plans do not focus enough on impact.

The Learning Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee provides timely scrutiny for a number of relevant issues that face education within the authority, including sensitive proposals relating to school organisation and a range of support services for schools. The training and support provided to members enables them to develop a thorough understanding of what is involved and, in turn, enables them to challenge and influence decisions and identify further areas of focus. Officers and guest partners provide the committee with clear and useful reports. Senior officers support the committee further by providing clarity and relevant additional information during meetings and in relevant pre-scrutiny meetings.

Cameo

The authority welcomes and gives careful consideration to the views of stakeholders, such as headteachers, parents, children and young people and residents to reinforce its understanding of people's views about the quality of its work and, in particular, to tailor services for the future. A good example is the way in which the authority is very active in seeking the views of pupils and including them in decisions. The Chief Executive, senior officers and elected members take pride in, and encourage, the contributions of the children and young people of Ceredigion and, as a result, they influence the authority's strategic direction in specific aspects, such as post-16 education and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. Members of the Youth Council demonstrate a high level of understanding of what is going on within the education services in Ceredigion. They are confident when exemplifying how their comments have influenced the improvement of services.

Ensuring opportunities for staff to develop within 'Team Ceredigion' is a high priority for the authority. There are clear and thorough arrangements to support and manage staff performance, in addition to ensuring consistency in terms of expectations. Targets for staff, which are drawn up jointly, are partly measurable and align closely with priorities in the authority's business plans. The progress of the authority's staff against their targets is reviewed regularly. Performance management processes include beneficial opportunities for leaders to celebrate successes, check on the well-being of those they manage and discuss staff development needs. On this basis, a purposeful programme of training has been planned, although the long-term effect of this training is not always evaluated fully. There is regular encouragement from leaders for staff to take responsibility for their own personal development and staff appreciate this. For example, several members of the school improvement team are studying for a Master's degree and external accreditations in areas that are of interest to them. Beneficial training and useful secondment arrangements are provided to develop the leadership skills of the authority's staff and ensure succession. A notable strength in this area is provision to develop the Welsh language skills of the authority's staff and school staff.

Ceredigion County Council fulfils its statutory role to protect and safeguard children well. The established integrated service, which includes social services and education departments, provides a comprehensive service of support. This includes early identification and support to support vulnerable families, together with a wide range of valuable support services to respond to the needs of children and young people. As a result of a strong mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, officers and frontline workers work together intelligently and productively for the benefit of the authority's children and young people.

There are robust strategic and operational arrangements relating to safeguarding issues and the range of representatives from relevant agencies is a strength.

Clear guidance and purposeful support are given to headteachers and designated persons within schools by the designated officer for safeguarding in education; this is a strong feature of the authority's work. Arrangements for implementing part 5 of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures are thorough. Safe recruitment processes are

robust and safeguarding training provided to education staff at all levels is of a very good quality.

The Council prioritises investment in its education service and schools, in line with its objective in its corporate strategy. Although there was a smaller settlement than the national average, the authority honoured its commitment to fund a 3.1% increase for its schools.

The local authority reviews its structures and plans for the long term to ensure value for money continuously. The authority has earmarked money to fund capital investment in its buildings and information technology infrastructure. The Council has been successful in procuring grants and reinvesting capital receipts.

The authority has regular planning and monitoring arrangements to support schools. As the local authority recognised the financial challenge for the 2024/25 budget, it made early contact with all schools in the county. Schools were supported carefully by the authority throughout the winter term so that they had time to prepare before the budget was finalised. Formal planning takes place annually for school budgets; however, there are very few medium-term plans in terms of the finances of individual schools which include assumptions for the future.

The local authority compares its expenditure with national measures to ensure that it invests in education in line its ambition. Although the school funding formula has not been reviewed for some time, elements of school funding are compared nationally through the finance group of the Association of Directors of Education in Wales. Within the county, school costs are compared informally through the knowledge of individuals within the finance team, but there is no formal benchmarking.

Service level agreements provided by the county are used regularly by schools, with headteachers and schools suggesting that a high-quality service is provided that provides value for money. Departments within the authority work together effectively, which adds value to the agreements by combining them.

As a result of the effective arrangements above, although the authority recognises that there are challenges to come in the future, school balances compare favourably with the national picture, with only one school in deficit at the end of 2023/24.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consult 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
- analyse 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
- carry 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 normally:

- meet 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
- look closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- consider the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinise 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 any 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:

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

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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