



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

# **Report following monitoring visit of local authority causing significant concern**

**Torfaen County Borough Council**

**Civic Centre  
Pontypool  
Torfaen  
NP4 6YB**

**Date of visit: October 2024**

**by**

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

**This report is also available in Welsh.**

## **Outcome of visit**

Since the core inspection, the Chief Executive has driven forward his clear plans to improve evaluation, accountability and performance management across the local authority. He and the Director of Education have successfully ensured that staff at all levels in the education service understand their role in securing improvements for children and young people across the local authority. The Director of Education has shared a clear vision for improvement across the education service and ensured that all staff feel valued and contribute meaningfully to the local authority's ongoing improvements.

Torfaen County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the most recent core inspection of their local government education services. As a result, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is removing the local authority from the list of local authorities causing significant concern.

## **Progress since the last inspection**

### **Improve outcomes for learners, particularly in secondary schools**

The Director for Education has secured a strong focus on improving outcomes for all children and young people in Torfaen. He has ensured that officers across the education service understand their role in driving these improvements.

Since the core inspection, we have inspected eleven primary schools, eight non-maintained settings, two secondary schools and one special school. Overall, inspection outcomes have been positive. Of these schools and settings, one primary school and one non maintained setting were placed into Estyn review. Two non-maintained settings and two primary schools were asked to provide case studies of effective practice. At the time of the core inspection the local authority had two secondary schools in special measures. One of these schools made sufficient improvement to be removed from follow-up in February 2023; the other remains in special measures after being placed in Estyn monitoring in 2015.

The local authority has worked effectively with the regional Education Achievement Service (EAS). This has helped to improve the information that is gathered about school performance. As a result, EAS now provides an in-depth analysis of pupils' learning and progress in schools in Torfaen, based on a broad range of first-hand evidence. This has helped officers to identify important strengths and areas for improvement across the local authority's schools.

The local authority has a strong focus on improving pupils' attendance. They have a clear strategy that is well understood by its officers and schools. Officers provide beneficial support and challenge to schools to improve pupils' attendance. This includes providing a broad range of data and asking insightful questions of school leaders. The local authority has also improved the way in which School Improvement Partners (SIPs) support and challenge schools about this aspect of their work. This is contributing well to improvements in pupils' attendance over the past twelve months. Despite these improvements, attendance in Torfaen is lower than it was prior to the pandemic, as it is nationally.

Although the local authority's rates of exclusions have reduced when compared to the same period last year, the local authority recognises that exclusion rates remain too high, particularly in a few secondary schools.

Since the core inspection, the local authority has maintained its effective work in identifying and supporting those young people who are at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). This has included the creation of the local authority catering service 'The Inspire Cafe', which provides employment and training for vulnerable young people. As a result of this work, there are very few pupils who become NEET in the local authority.

### **Strengthen performance management**

Since the core inspection, performance management processes have improved notably. This is underpinned by leaders' high expectations for all staff to be accountable for securing improvements in their areas of responsibility. There is a well understood performance management process, where staff are set clear objectives, in line with the county, education service and team plans. Staff have regular opportunities to review progress against their objectives and to identify professional learning needs. As a result, teams and individuals are now held to account more effectively for the quality of their work than at the time of the core inspection, and senior leaders tackle underperformance robustly. The appointment of an evaluation and improvement officer has enabled the local authority to secure strong processes to monitor closely the performance of individuals and teams in the education service.

Staff benefit from a broad range of professional learning opportunities that are linked closely to their performance management objectives and the education service's priorities. In general, officers have helpful opportunities to identify their own improvement needs. This has supported them well to improve their ability to accurately evaluate and plan for improvement. In particular, the extended leadership team and the associate leadership programme, where officers at all levels have opportunities to take part in leadership groups, have supported many staff to broaden their understanding of the education service's work and to think and plan more strategically. These groups have helped to distribute leadership and encouraged staff

to challenge and support each other constructively. This has enabled the education service to secure important improvements and increase its leadership capacity.

Line management processes are clear and helpful. Officers meet regularly with their line managers to discuss important aspects of their work. Staff are provided with helpful support and challenge during these meetings and are held to account well for the delivery of their service plans. However, the impact of actions agreed in line management meetings are not always considered precisely enough.

### **Strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning processes and the link between them**

The work of the Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Children and Families and the Director of Education is driven by a strong sense of moral purpose. They make visible their ambitious aim to reduce inequality and improve the life chances for all young people in Torfaen. There is a tangible culture of continuous improvement across the local authority that underpins and drives the work of staff in the education service. As a result, staff understand their roles well and carry them out diligently.

Leaders have established effective evaluation and improvement processes. This is enabling the Leader and the Executive Member for Children and Families to understand the education service's strengths and areas for improvement well. These members engage regularly with officers and have a clear overview of schools and settings across the authority. As a result, they challenge and support officers more effectively than at the time of the core inspection. Scrutiny processes have also improved notably since the core inspection. The Education Overview and Scrutiny committee is now provided with accurate and helpful reports. The committee members ask pertinent questions and provide regular challenge through clear recommendations, most of which have been accepted by Cabinet.

The Director of Education and his senior team have secured beneficial approaches to collaborative evaluation and improvement that enable staff to challenge and support each other's evaluations constructively. These processes are well understood and implemented consistently by staff at all levels. Officers evaluate robustly, regularly and accurately the work of the service. As a result, senior leaders and officers have a strong understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement across service areas in education. This enables the authority to plan effectively and secure improvements in a timely manner, for example, the notable improvement in their knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the work of settings, schools and the PRU.

Since the core inspection, the local authority has improved the voice of young people in informing their strategic direction. For example, leaders have established 'Rebel Youth Torfaen' which has enabled pupils from secondary schools to shadow senior roles in the local authority. These pupils have supported officers to think creatively

about how to tackle challenges faced by young people across Torfaen. Senior leaders have taken forward recommendations from the Rebel Youth group and are planning meaningfully to address them.

Strategic planning takes good account of national and local priorities and has a strong focus on delivering the Wellbeing of Future Generations objectives. The education improvement plan, and team plans, have clear links to the county plan. The education improvement plan has helpful features such as focused success criteria and relevant timescales that enable leaders to keep their plans on track. For example, the Head of Resources and Planning, supported ably by the Head of Access and Engagement, monitors closely the progress of capital and maintenance programmes.

There is a clear cycle of monitoring, evaluation and review that supports officers well to focus suitably on the impact that their improvement planning is having. However, at team level the planning approach, which follows the corporate system, does not enable officers to identify precisely the success criteria. As a result, the outcome and impact of actions taken are not always monitored or reported effectively. At times, team evaluations focus too heavily on the activity that has taken place and are not always sufficiently precise regarding the impact of those actions.

Overall, the changes leaders have made to evaluation and improvement planning processes have had a positive impact on many aspects of the education service's work. These aspects include improving attendance, ensuring that modified timetables are used and reviewed appropriately in schools and strengthening financial planning in the education service.

### **Improve strategic leadership of learning and additional learning needs (ALN)**

Since his appointment, the Director of Education has provided strong, strategic and compassionate leadership. He has developed a clear and well understood vision for education and service improvement in Torfaen and shared it effectively. This vision is underpinned by high expectations and accountability. There are now clear processes for school improvement, underpinned by effective challenge and support to schools and settings.

The local authority worked successfully to clearly define the roles that the local authority, EAS and schools play in ensuring the best outcomes for children and young people in Torfaen. As a result, school leaders are now clear about the role that each play in supporting their ongoing improvements. In addition, leaders and officers in the education service have a strong and detailed knowledge of all aspects of their schools' work.

The collaborative partnership between the local authority and EAS has been strengthened well since the core inspection as have relationships with schools,

settings and the PRU. These relationships are built on high levels of mutual respect and a shared ambition to secure the best quality education for children and young people in the borough.

The Director of Education and the Head of Learning and Achievement have established strong working relationships with senior leaders in EAS and this has helped to establish a culture where challenge and support is welcomed and encouraged. The local authority regularly communicates their high expectations with EAS and provides beneficial opportunities for EAS to identify strengths and raise any concerns about support for schools.

The local authority has worked pro-actively alongside leaders in EAS to strengthen approaches to school improvement. This has included providing helpful guidance to school leaders and ensuring that School Improvement Partners (SIPs) have a clear programme for their engagement with schools. As a result, SIPs generally provide beneficial challenge and support to their schools. In addition, the professional learning offer is now more tailored to the needs of Torfaen's schools.

There are now beneficial processes and systems for sharing information about schools within the local authority and between the local authority and EAS. This includes the local authority's 'heat map' and generally helpful evaluative reports provided by EAS. In addition, the Principal School Improvement Partner (PSIP) works closely with senior leaders in the local authority to provide regular updates on support that schools receive. As a result, there has been a notable improvement in the range and quality of information provided to the local authority by EAS, although in a few cases, school support overviews are too positive about the progress that schools have made.

Despite a turbulent period since the core inspection, the ALN team has remained focussed on the effective delivery of statutory and core services. As a result, teams have continued to provide valuable support for children and young people and their families for specific aspects of ALN.

The local authority has a clear vision to support its learners with ALN and has strengthened the leadership of this aspect well. Leaders have been pro-active in identifying and tackling underperformance to improve service delivery, including supporting and challenging staff to improve the quality of their work.

Leaders across the service understand their areas of responsibility well and are highly committed to improving the provision and outcomes for pupils with ALN. They have recognised the need to review the strategy for supporting children and young people with ALN and they are ensuring that high quality teaching and learning is key to ensuring the best outcomes for all pupils.

The local authority has developed a robust process for monitoring the use of modified timetables. This is helping them to understand better why and where these are happening as well as providing support for schools to reduce the number of pupils currently on reduced timetables. Further, the recent changes to the managed moves policy have had a positive impact on supporting schools to reduce exclusions, although these remain too high.

Partnership working in the ALN service is a notable strength. Staff work with a range of internal services and stakeholder groups well to strengthen the provision for children and young people with ALN. Overall senior leaders within schools and settings feel well supported by local authority ALN and inclusion officers. However, at times the capacity across the teams limits the scope of support and guidance that the local authority can provide to all settings, schools and the PRU.

The local authority makes effective use of a range of data and information as part of its evaluation of services. As a result, it is beginning to develop a body of evidence around effective practice for supporting pupils with ALN and is using this well to support schools. A good example is the recent review of local authority specialist classes, which has provided officers with a helpful evidence base. They use this information effectively to identify strengths and areas for improvement and to develop the use of this provision across the authority.