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Archwilio Cymru
Audit Wales

A report on education services in

Cyngor Sir Powys/Powys County Council

County Hall
Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 5LG

Date of inspection: February 2025

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

This report is also available in Welsh.

About Cyngor Sir Powys/Powys County Council

Powys has 16,391 pupils across 86 schools. There are 72 primary schools, three all-age schools, eight secondary schools, and three special schools, of which 21 are Welsh-medium providers.

Over a three-year average, 15.4% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals.

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 Powys is noted below:

- 8.0% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minorities
- 9.5% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action)
- 2.5% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action Plus)
- 1.1% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Statemented)
- 6.5% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan)
- 2.7% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A,B or C)
- 8.9% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are fluent in Welsh
- 245 children looked after (rounded to nearest 5 for disclosure reasons)

We carried out a separate inspection of the youth work provision in Powys County Council a few weeks prior to the local government education services (LGES) inspection. Where relevant, the findings and the evaluations from the youth work inspection has informed the work of the LGES inspection team.

Summary

There have been a number of recent changes in senior leadership in Powys County Council local government education services. This includes the recently appointed Chief Executive and Director of Education as well as a newly established education leadership team. This new team has worked to build trusting relationships with schools and other stakeholders and has prioritised developing a broad understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in the education directorate. Despite this, overtime, leadership at all levels has had a limited impact on securing important improvements in education services or in improving outcomes for children and young people.

Inspection outcomes in secondary and all-age schools have been poor over time. Since the last Local Government Education Services inspection in 2019, only two secondary schools have not required any level of follow-up. Whilst primary school inspections have been more positive, a larger proportion of primary schools have been placed into follow-up since February 2021 than we generally see nationally.

There are a few examples where school improvement support is effective but, overall, school improvement processes and their impact are underdeveloped. This is because too often officers focus too heavily on school improvement paperwork at the expense of working with schools to support the most pressing improvement priorities. There are also examples of additional learning needs (ALN) officers providing helpful support to schools, pupils and their families. Despite this, the strategic leadership of ALN is not effective enough and has not ensured that support strategies have been reviewed or evaluated to ensure that all schools get access to high quality and consistent support.

The early years team have a good oversight and understanding of the non-maintained settings and provide helpful, tailored support. This support has had a positive impact on improving the provision and leadership in settings and is valued by staff.

Powys' ten-year school transformation plan generally provides clear aims and objectives. There are helpful links to the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), which has had a positive impact on increasing opportunities for children and young people to access their education through the medium of Welsh. The local authority has also taken difficult decisions to close schools with the aim of reducing surplus places. Whilst the local authority takes into account a broad range of views when planning school transformation, proposals often lack sufficient information about the intended impact on learner outcomes. As a result, this aspect is not evaluated sufficiently. In addition, although the

local authority attempted to reorganise its sixth form provision, current arrangements have not led to improved learner outcomes, are not financially sustainable and do not support equal access to post-16 provision for all learners including through the medium of Welsh and for those pupils with ALN.

The local authority has prioritised its work on reducing the impact of poverty on children and young people. It has provided schools with a range of professional learning opportunities and the 'Poverty Child Taskforce' has facilitated work with external providers to support children, young people and their families. However, overall, the local authority has not evaluated its work to consider the impact of this work on improving attainment of children and young people.

Members and senior leaders have recently secured strong leadership for corporate safeguarding. Schools are provided with suitable support and challenge to improve their safeguarding processes and, generally, officers have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in this aspect in their schools. However, when compared to other local authorities, a notably higher proportion of schools in Powys still have important site security issues that give cause for concern. Although the local authority often identifies these risks, in many cases they do not address them until Estyn also note the shortcomings.

The local authority knows its schools' financial situations well and more recently has improved the way in which it supports and challenges schools where officers identify concerns. This has helped to bring a renewed focus on reducing in-year deficits in schools. Despite this work, over time, the local authority has not had enough impact in improving school budget positions

Evaluation and improvement processes in Powys County Council are not effective enough and have not led to important or sustainable improvements. Although the cabinet and senior leaders have an ambitious vision for a 'stronger fairer, greener' Powys, priorities in the corporate plan do not specifically reference education, limiting the focus of evaluation on this important aspect through corporate management systems. In addition to this, the education service improvement plan does not provide a clear strategic direction for education across the authority.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure that the local authority addresses urgently important school site security issues

R2 Strengthen the quality and impact of leadership, including political leadership, at all levels

R3 Strengthen the quality of support and challenge to schools to improve outcomes for all learners, including those with ALN

R4 Work with partners to rapidly develop and implement a model for 16-19 education that is financially viable and sustainable, and meets the needs of all learners, and considers Welsh-medium and ALN provision

What happens next

Following this inspection, the HMCI is of the opinion that this local authority causes significant concern. The local authority will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will review the local authority's progress through a series of monitoring visits.

Main findings

Education services and their impact

How well does local authority support all schools, in particular secondary schools, to secure improvements?

Recently the local authority has worked to strengthen relationships and trust with schools. This has involved engaging with school leaders to consider the barriers preventing them from securing rapid improvements in the quality of the provision for their pupils. In addition, the recently appointed head of school improvement and learning is beginning to gather a picture of the broad strengths and shortcomings in the school improvement service, although it is too early to measure the impact of this work.

Despite some of these very recent developments, over time, leadership of school improvement at all levels has been too variable and the local authority has had a limited impact on bringing about sustainable improvements in schools.

Over time, the inspection outcomes for Powys' secondary and all-age schools have been weak. Since the last local government education service core inspection in 2019, only two secondary schools have not required any level of follow-up. Since February 2021, we have inspected three secondary schools and placed all of these into Estyn review. One of these schools had a monitoring visit in September 2024 and was judged to have made insufficient progress and placed into significant improvement. The other two are currently still in Estyn review. Two of the secondary schools who were inspected prior to 2021 were initially placed into significant improvement. Both schools were judged to have made insufficient progress and were placed into special measures. One of these has since been removed from special measures, but the other school remains in this category after first being placed into a statutory follow up in March 2020. Since February 2021, we have inspected three all-age schools. Two of these schools were placed into Estyn review and the other was judged to require significant improvement.

Since February 2021, we have inspected 39 primary schools. Twenty-eight of these were judged not to require any level of follow up and four were asked to provide a case study of effective practice. Seven primary schools were placed into Estyn review, three of which have now been removed from this level of follow-up. Three primary schools were judged to require significant improvement, and one was placed into special measures. The proportion of primary schools being placed into follow-up is generally greater in Powys than it is nationally.

Of the three special schools in Powys, we have inspected one since February 2021 and this was judged not to require any level of follow-up. We inspected another special school in 2020 and judged this to require Estyn review. This was removed from this level of follow-up in 2023, after being given a six months' extension to secure the required improvements. We inspected the pupil referral unit in 2024 and judged this to require significant improvement.

There are a few examples where schools are provided with effective support and challenge that secures improvement. In these cases, school improvement advisers (SIAs) work effectively with school leaders to broker and provide tailored support, linked to clear and well understood outcomes for success. However, too often, school improvement teams focus too heavily on evaluating school improvement paperwork, rather than working with school leaders to bring about improvement and evaluate the impact of those improvements on pupils' standards.

There is an agreed programme of visits to schools. However, school improvement processes do not focus on evaluating the most pertinent issues in Powys's schools.

Leaders and officers at all levels do not use first-hand evidence well enough to gain a clear view of the strengths and areas for improvement across Powys's schools. As a result, the quality and impact of school improvement work are not effective enough and leaders do not challenge the information provided to them about their schools sufficiently. This is because quality assurance processes do not focus on the quality or impact of the support provided to schools. In addition, the professional learning programme is not co-ordinated well enough or linked closely enough to the school improvement teams' work.

The local authority has recently begun to reflect on its approaches to school improvement and has introduced new approaches, for example refocusing its 'Team Around the School' meetings, where officers across the education service discuss progress in schools. These processes are in the very early stages and are not effective enough in challenging and supporting officers and schools. This is because the impact of any identified actions is not followed up robustly enough.

Evaluation of the impact of support, including professional learning, provided to schools is underdeveloped. As a result, the local authority does not have a clear enough overview of the impact of professional learning and school improvement support to plan for and secure important improvements.

The early years team know and understand the non-maintained settings in Powys well. They make helpful use of first-hand evidence to evaluate the impact of provision and leadership in settings and provide timely and helpful support when they identify any concerns. Outcomes from inspections in non-maintained settings have generally been positive over time and only a very few settings have required follow-up activity.

How well has the school transformation agenda ensured that there is appropriate provision for all learners, including those in Welsh-medium education and in Post-16?

The broad aims and intentions of the ten-year school transformation plan are clear and integrated with the local authority's other strategies including the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). The scrutiny committee provide appropriate challenge and considerations relating to school reorganisation, which has resulted in appropriate changes to the transformation strategy where applicable.

School consultations take good account of a range of stakeholders' views. In recent years, the local authority has taken difficult decisions in challenging contexts to close small, rural schools. Despite these actions, the proportion of surplus places has increased across

Powys's schools, and this is partly due to changing demography. Officers have evaluated fully the reasons for this increase in surplus places.

Officers make good use of catchment area reviews to inform and drive the transformation process. They reflect well on their approaches to reorganisation work, identifying potential improvements and use these to inform future projects well. In general, the strategy, plans and proposals often lack sufficient detail in terms of planned impact on learner outcomes. This makes it difficult for the local authority to evaluate fully the success of reorganisations, and to consider the difference that the transformation programme is making to learners' progress.

Local authority officers have worked with school leaders and wider stakeholders across the authority to develop options for post-16 learners. Over the past three years, the local authority has introduced the 'Chweched Powys Sixth model' to provide sixth form learning on twelve school sites. However, these arrangements have not led to improved learner outcomes, are not financially sustainable and do not support equal access to post-16 provision for all learners. As a result, progress in addressing post-16 transformation has been too slow.

Incorporating the development of the Welsh language as an aim within the transformation plan has been a notable step to ensure increased access to Welsh-medium provision. Recently members have strengthened the political support with an increased ambition to ensure that the local authority's WESP priorities have gathered momentum. Welsh-medium provision is increasing in line with their WESP targets. WESP officers are part of the transformation group and report to members and relevant stakeholders regularly. The local authority, working with other agencies, is pro-active in supporting the increase in the number of pupils accessing Welsh-medium provision. The authority's Welsh language forum and subgroups have improved engagement with stakeholder focus groups.

The development of immersion approaches is increasing opportunities for pupils to transfer to Welsh-medium provision. The local authority has a centre as well as temporary 'pop-up provision' to meet demand in other schools. The transformation plan to address Welsh-medium secondary provision has had a positive impact on enabling learners to access Welsh-medium secondary education in the north of the local authority. This is ensuring that there is a seamless education continuum journey for these pupils. However, pupils in the south of the authority do not have the same equity of provision.

In planning new schools, the transformation team are supported by relevant specialist ALN teams who provide valuable advice regarding the configuration and appropriateness of

learning spaces when planning new school buildings. However, the ten-year transformation plan does not take enough account of the changing profile of pupils with ALN or provision through the medium of Welsh for this group of pupils.

How effective is the strategic leadership of ALN, including for pupils who are Education otherwise than at school (EOTAS)?

Frequent leadership changes in Powys have weakened the strategic direction of ALN services, delaying progress against key priorities and reducing overall effectiveness. The lack of continuity has led to shifting priorities, limiting the full implementation of transformation plans. While progress has been made in some areas, inconsistent strategic evaluation and weak long-term planning hinder the ability to provide effective, high-quality ALN services across the county.

In 2020, the local authority introduced an ALN transformation strategy, outlining six key areas for reform. The local authority has achieved progress in a few key areas. These include the redesignation of specialist autism classes and the establishment of satellite provisions from special schools. However, the authority did not consider sufficiently the data available to help them determine the location of specialist classes. As a result, there is inequity of provision across the authority.

The 2024 strategic plan for ALN and inclusion builds on the foundation of the 2020 plan. The current strategy lacks evidence of the implementation of previous strategies or their impact. There is insufficient detail on how priorities will be funded, and goals and outcomes are not specific enough. Additionally, the authority does not consider fully issues around long-term sustainability, particularly in addressing workforce challenges related to the recruitment and retention of skilled staff for ALN services. Although the strategic plan was co-written with partners, schools were not part of this process and the commitments of different partners in delivering on priorities is not clear in this plan.

The local authority has focused strongly on improving education other than at school (EOTAS) provision over the past year driven by increased commitment from officers at all levels. This has helped raise awareness of the needs of vulnerable learners. However, there is a lack of a strategic and systematic approach to evaluation, limiting the ability of leaders to plan effectively for long-term improvements. This is particularly evident in the planning for pupil referral unit (PRU) provision, where considerations around the growth in pupil numbers and financial implications are underdeveloped.

The local authority provides training, professional learning and advisory support to school additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCos), which they generally appreciate. The

ALNCo champion role has helped ALNCos share best practices, quality assure school-based ALN strategies and strengthen collaboration across schools. Champions also improve awareness of local authority ALN services.

ALN casework and family liaison officers play a crucial role in supporting pupils and their families. By maintaining long-term relationships, they build trust and ensure continuity of support as pupils transition through the education system. The electronic referral and tracking system is an invaluable tool that improves decision-making, allowing the local authority to track the number of individual development plans (IDPs), monitor when plans are due for review, and ensure timely updates. Schools, parents and carers, and professionals benefit from access to relevant information on pupils and panel decisions.

Specialist teachers offer drop-in sessions for ALNCos and early years settings. They provide advice on whole-school approaches and individual pupil cases. However, the capacity within ALN teams to support pupils with autism and speech, language, and communication is insufficient to meet demand. The team supporting looked-after children tracks progress effectively and provides targeted interventions, benefiting pupils, schools, and carers.

Provision and access to specialist support for Welsh-medium learners with ALN is limited. This inequity restricts education opportunities for Welsh-speaking pupils, creating additional barriers to inclusion.

The routine and systematic evaluation of ALN services remains underdeveloped. The local authority's evaluation methods focus too heavily on outputs rather than measuring the impact. Service priorities do not consistently align with the ALN and Inclusion strategy, making it difficult to track improvements.

How effective is the support for pupils from low-income households in this rural county?

The council has a clear ambition for a 'Fairer Powys', underpinned by a strong sense of equity. The Child Poverty Task Force enables officers to collaborate beneficially with other service areas and external organisations to mitigate the impact of poverty for families in Powys. The task force facilitates a range of helpful projects. For example, a family learning catering project in a primary school enables parents to work towards food hygiene qualifications and allows them access to work opportunities and further learning. Pilot schools participate in a helpful children's research initiative, in which 'Youth Champions' collect the views of peers, parents and teachers to inform schools' work to support children and young people impacted by poverty.

The grant-funded Community Focused Schools pilot is also included in the task force's action plan. The team of family liaison officers attached to the five pilot clusters provide a wide range of front-line support. This team has helpful examples of the impact of their work for individual children and families. The Community Focused Schools Team and the Early Years Team evaluate their work suitably, but the impact of activity delivered by other teams is less clear. Although the task force has broad success criteria, the operational delivery plans that support it lack a sufficiently sharp focus on improving attainment and attendance.

School leaders benefit from a range of professional learning opportunities that are focused on evidence-based strategies to support pupils disadvantaged by poverty. The in-school training and conferences have influenced how leaders address challenges specific to their schools, but there is limited evidence of how well this has been incorporated into schools' own improvement work. Overall, the local authority has not demonstrated the impact of this work to improve the attainment or attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals.

The service's focus on reducing the impact of poverty for pupils from low-income households is apparent across a range of its development plans. However, important aspects, such as improving attendance, are often spread across plans without coherent links to each other. Resulting actions have not delivered sustained improvements in attendance, particularly for this group of learners. In addition, success criteria across plans are too vague and there is limited use of the data available to officers, including learner destinations post-16, to assess the impact of the authority's work in this area. This is particularly the case for pupils' attainment and attendance, including persistent absences.

The Early Years Team has a strong oversight of the Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG) and can clearly demonstrate the impact of this funding on their settings. However, evaluation overall of the use of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) lacks rigour, and there is limited evidence and evaluation of the impact of PDG on outcomes for pupils across the local authority.

How well does the local authority support and challenge its schools to make the most effective use of their resources?

The local authority knows the financial position of its schools well. Finance officers provide timely and clear information to education leaders about the financial position of all schools, for example through 'Team Around the School' meetings and Head of Service reports. Finance officers monitor closely the in-year position of schools causing financial concern.

Several schools are currently under a statutory warning notice or notice of concern because of their financial position, demonstrating the willingness of the current senior leaders to use their powers. A few schools, particularly in the secondary sector, are carrying very large cumulative deficits. Over time, the local authority's use of statutory powers has been inconsistent and had a limited impact.

In 2022, the local authority decided to introduce cluster business managers to support primary schools in particular but was unable to recruit to any of the roles. This limited the authority's plan to improve the quality of financial management of school budgets. Furthermore, staffing challenges within some individual schools have resulted in local authority finance officers providing cover for school business manager roles, impacting on the team's capacity to support and challenge schools.

Finance officers provide helpful support, advice and training to schools to help them set their budgets and manage their finances, for example by providing finance surgeries, telephone consultations and a benchmarking tool to aid comparison of costs with schools across the local authority. The team has had a strong focus in 2024-2025 on reducing projected in-year deficits. The team's support is valued by most schools. The local authority has recently strengthened its support for schools to manage their budgets by procuring helpful new software that has increased the accuracy and timeliness of in-year positions and supports helpful forecasting.

In recent years, the local authority has carried out in depth finance reviews of a few secondary schools. However, the approaches to this review were inconsistent and the work had limited impact in challenging and supporting schools to manage their budgets. In 2024, the local authority commissioned a useful, detailed report on the curriculum, timetabling and staffing models in all secondary and all-age schools to identify and address efficiency while optimising learning experiences. Officers have started working with individual schools to consider and address the recommendations for them in the report.

The consistency and follow-through of challenge to schools with financial concerns is not as strong as the support provided to these schools. For example, school improvement advisers do not always raise and follow through financial concerns during school visits and benchmarking tools only provide comparisons within Powys rather than considering the context nationally or within other rural authorities. Although just over half of primary schools in 2024-2025 have a high surplus balance, the local authority has chosen not to direct the use of funding in any of these schools.

Despite new leadership in education services in 2024 bringing a renewed focus on reducing in-year deficits in schools, the local authority has not had enough impact over time in supporting sustainable improvement in school budget positions. In addition, the local authority's ability to support and challenge individual schools to manage their budgets is adversely affected by a range of strategic decisions and financial issues affecting education services overall.

Leading and improving

Following a period of change, the chief executive and the corporate director of education are establishing a foundation with the aim of developing effective practice and sustainable improvement in its education services. Recently appointed senior leaders in the education directorate are beginning to work together purposefully with a sense of energy and resolve. However, over time, leadership has not had a strong enough impact on important areas, including on improving outcomes for learners in schools in Powys.

There has been a reallocation of responsibilities to increase leadership capacity, for example by uncoupling leadership responsibilities for children's services from education. Leaders are prioritising building stronger working relationships between the local authority and its schools and are reviewing roles and responsibilities to offer stronger support and challenge.

The local authority has an ambitious vision for a 'stronger, fairer, greener Powys'. However, the objectives in the corporate plan do not refer explicitly to education. Important areas for improvement in education are not clear enough in improvement planning. This makes it difficult to clarify the strategic direction for education, drive improvement, or to hold leaders, at all levels, to account. Management functions, such as corporate quarterly performance meetings, are aligned with the corporate objectives and, as a result, there is an insufficient focus on the most important areas for improvement in education.

New personnel and new approaches to leadership are supporting closer working relationships between members and officers. The leader of the council and portfolio holder for education have a broad understanding of school issues and offer suitable support and challenge to the directorate. The learning and skills scrutiny committee is beginning to improve its ability to review and challenge. However, it does not aways plan their work programme to focus on the key issues in education. In addition, over time, it has not always received appropriate information to have a detailed enough understanding of all aspects, for example the performance of learners, to make informed recommendations

for improvement. Professional learning for members in relation to education is underdeveloped.

The director of education is determined to make improvements to the service. He has reviewed the work of the directorate, undertaken a critical appraisal of self-evaluation, and is fostering closer working across teams. This is contributing to a growing culture of collaboration. In this period of transition, leadership responsibilities in the directorate, although under review, remain imbalanced. Although there is increased joint working between teams, for example through remodelled meeting structures, in a few instances teams still work in isolation, limiting opportunities to share effective practices.

There are clear processes and an annual cycle for appraisal, performance review and evaluation. However, objectives for the directorate are too broad, and improvement plans lack precision, clear actions and specific success criteria. There is a lack of coherence across processes, including team planning. Generally, there is too much emphasis on measuring success through the outcomes of inspections, rather than through an evaluation of a wide range of evidence, including first-hand evidence.

Appraisal processes are completed diligently and in detail by leaders and those they line manage. However, because they are not linked to secure and shared directorate-specific objectives, these processes do not support improvement sufficiently well. Where leaders have identified underperformance, they have undertaken performance reviews and put support plans in place. However, in some instances, these processes have not been robust enough to address weaknesses and find solutions in a timely manner.

There are many opportunities for staff to engage in professional learning. Leaders new in post appreciate one-to-one coaching and mentoring. However, overall, professional learning is not always tailored well enough to role specific or service needs. It is not planned or evaluated strategically enough to support improvement in the work of the directorate consistently.

The local authority has responded positively to improve corporate safeguarding, following important shortcomings identified in the most recent Audit Wales report. As a result, there is now robust corporate leadership of safeguarding. All service areas complete appropriate annual self-evaluation of safeguarding and create actions to improve based on their outcomes. ‘Safeguarding champions’ promote safeguarding in each service area and provide helpful support and guidance for staff.

The Corporate Safeguarding Board includes representation from each service area. They generally monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements across the local

authority appropriately. The board provides scrutiny committees with information from their meetings regularly, although reports often lack detail. Members hold the board to account for the quality of their work through effective challenge.

The Education Safeguarding Team provides schools and settings with a high level of beneficial and timely support and guidance. Officers respond quickly to concerns raised by providers, including when dealing with critical incidents. Regular informative newsletters, briefings and meetings enable officers to share important updates with providers. The local authority provides valuable support for safer recruitment. There is a wide range of useful training available for school staff and governors.

Officers require all schools and the PRU to complete bi-annual safeguarding audits. These provide both schools, the PRU and the local authority with a detailed overview of each school's strengths and areas to improve. Through the scrutiny of each audit and a rolling programme of school visits, officers offer providers bespoke support to make improvements to their safeguarding arrangements. Over the past few years there has been local authority capital investment to address a range of identified site management issues in targeted schools. However, despite this work, when compared to other local authorities, a notably higher proportion of schools in Powys still have important site security issues that give cause for concern. Although the local authority often identifies these risks, too often they do not address them until Estyn also note the shortcomings.

Although the local authority expects all schools and the PRU to submit information on instances of bullying, there are important shortcomings in this work. Very few schools report any occurrences of bullying each year. Officers do not undertake any meaningful analysis and evaluation of patterns of bullying over time. In addition, they do not challenge schools when they do not submit bullying data.

The authority's Cabinet has recently proposed to fully fund its funding formula for schools for 2025-26. However, in the previous two years the authority as part of its financial strategy, required schools to draw on their reserves. This, combined with increasing energy costs and other cost pressures, has led overall school balances to reduce from over £8.9millon at the end of 2021-2022 to £0.9million at the end of 2023-2024, which was the third lowest level across Wales. The authority retains a higher proportion of education funding centrally than most other local authorities without fully considering whether this provides value for money. The authority's slow pace of change over time, in areas including ALN and Post 16 transformation, impacts negatively on its overall use of resources for education.

The School Budget Forum is a proactive and committed group of school leaders, governors and business managers who constructively seek to engage about financial decisions affecting schools. The forum generally provides a good level of challenge. However, its influence is restricted on a few occasions when forum members do not receive information in a timely manner. The local authority most recently reviewed its funding formula in January 2024, following forum discussion and consultation. The authority has a structured approach to continually review elements of the formula through its Formula Review Group, which reports to the School Budget Forum.

In recent years, the authority has experienced in year overspends on its school maintenance budget. Following a survey of building condition across all its schools in autumn 2024, the authority now has a comprehensive understanding of the scale of the backlog maintenance across its school estate. The level of backlog maintenance presents a notable risk to the authority which it recognises.

The authority provides a range of useful service level agreements which most schools make use of and those have recently been reviewed to best meet the needs of schools.

The authority's arrangements when commissioning services in education, including the Mid Wales Education Partnership, do not always identify clear and quantifiable outcomes. The reports provided to the authority on those services do not consistently provide analysis of the quality of the outcomes achieved, which limits the authority's ability to assess the economy and effectiveness of those services.

The authority has clear arrangements at an officer level to monitor the financial position of the local authority and education service and both Cabinet and the Finance Panel receive useful budget monitoring reports throughout the year.

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

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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