

12 February 2025

Dear Lindsay Harvey,

On the 14-16 January, Andrea Davies HMI and a team of two HMI carried out an enhanced local authority link inspector (LALI) visit which focused on attendance and your Welsh in Education Strategic plan.

During our visit, we had the opportunity to:

- Meet with you and your senior team
- Meet with the cabinet member for education and the chair of education scrutiny
- Meet with a range of headteachers
- Meet with groups of young people
- Meet with attendance officers
- Consider documentation helpfully provided by your teams

We hope you and your education services team found this visit to be helpful. Here is a summary of our findings.

Focus area 1: What are the main challenges around attendance identified by the local authority how are they being addressed and what is the impact?

Bridgend's corporate plan 2023-2028 identifies attendance as a clear priority for improvement. The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorates' Strategic Plan 2023-2026 provides a comprehensive overview of the steps that being taken by the local authority to improve pupil attendance which permeate service plans well. Officers have identified accurately priorities for continued improvement using a range of relevant information.

Local authority officers and school leaders have aspirational attendance targets in place demonstrating high expectations to improve pupil attendance. Overall, there is an encouraging upward trend in pupil attendance for both primary and secondary schools.

The gap in attendance between pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are not is beginning to show improvement. The local authority demonstrates a high commitment in supporting schools to continue to improve within this area.

Monitoring and evaluation processes provide valuable regular updates for Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny meetings. Council members understand well the attendance issues across schools and the impact of the work of their officers.

The collaborative culture of the well-established 'Team Bridgend' promotes a consistent approach through effective communication between headteachers and officers. There are useful opportunities for leaders to share effective practice on a regular basis, for example in Team Bridgend meetings and during primary and secondary headteacher meetings. These meetings enable schools to share their approaches through professional dialogue. The LA encourage headteachers to tailor attendance strategies to the context of their school.

There is strong partnership working across the directorate and with external services to support improvements in attendance. This is well coordinated by the Education Engagement Team (EET), maximises the use of the local authority's resources, and provides schools and their clusters with a cohesive approach to tackling targeted attendance concerns.

The attendance working group has wide representation from schools and the local authority. Over the last 18 months key strategic and operational changes have been made through this group to strengthen support to schools to improve pupil attendance. This includes the development of a new local authority School Attendance Strategy in line with Welsh Government guidelines which has been adopted by schools and the PRU. In addition, the coordination of the school attendance templates, and development of an attendance

toolkit and annual audit are in place. These developments are providing a consistent and agreed approach to improving pupil attendance across all schools effectively.

Officers maximise limited resources well to drive improvement in pupil attendance. This includes the reorganisation of the Education Welfare Service (EWS) as part of the EET. Headteachers value these developments as positive improvements within the local authority. The targeted support approach is working successfully and deploys resources effectively to maximise impact. The EWS is highly valued by headteachers. These developments are contributing well to improving pupil attendance.

School leaders receive termly school on a page (SOAP) update on pupil attendance from the local authority officers. Leaders use this information well to inform their strategies, access additional support and work collaboratively within their clusters to steer the work of the EWS to support the most vulnerable pupils and their families well.

There is a strong focus on pupil voice contributing to improvements in pupil attendance. This is viewed by officers as a powerful tool in strengthening attendance key messages.

Areas for consideration

There is a realistic understanding shared by officers and headteachers that improvements in pupil attendance are complex and long term, particularly in reducing incidents of persistent absenteeism. It may be useful to consider the long-term financial resource implications of your strategies to sustain improvement. How will the recent changes in the information management system further strengthen the analysis of pupil attendance data to proactively target resources and support to schools?

Focus area 2: What is the progress towards meeting the Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP) priorities and what is the impact?

Leaders have developed a clear vision for Welsh medium provision across Bridgend County Borough and communicate this regularly and effectively with schools and stakeholders. Senior officers, elected members and staff within the Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate, work well to develop Welsh language provision across the authority. There is a strong commitment from the local authority through their capital investment programme to develop the Welsh medium provision.

Since the WESP co-ordinator has been in post, WESP priorities have become a more prominent part of the authority's strategic vision for developing all aspects of the Welsh language. This is supported well by headteachers and staff across schools and settings and through the 'Team Bridgend' approach. The Welsh Education Forum (WEF) has a broad membership from across both English and Welsh medium schools, officers and elected members as well as a range of external stakeholders. The WEF subgroups contribute purposefully to developing priorities outlined within the WESP.

Although the numbers of pupils transferring from non-maintained settings into Welsh medium schools remain a challenge, officers work collaboratively with all stakeholders to address these challenges. The local authority has identified the need to develop non maintained Welsh medium provision and have recently developed 2 new childcare hubs. The challenges in finding staff with the requisite skills to operate the childcare hubs are being addressed innovatively for example offering a beneficial financial package including fully resourced accommodation resulting in one of the hubs being allocated to a provider with an agreed start date.

The authority's provision for Welsh immersion in the primary sector has evolved from a peripatetic model to a school-based provision following an evaluation of the previous model. This is at an early stage of development.

The WEF work collaboratively with stakeholders to address key priorities such as increasing the number of pupils studying Welsh as a subject at A level. They have developed a hybrid model which encourages more pupils to study the subject and to ensure that staff expertise is maintained. Ysgol Gyfun Llangynwyd has partnerships with Welsh medium schools in neighbouring authorities to deliver a range of post-16 subjects.

All schools engage in Siarter iaith / Cymraeg Campus activity, which promotes pupils' awareness of the language. The WESP co-ordinator works closely with schools and the PRU to engage agencies to offer opportunities which enrich Welsh provision in schools. Involvement of pupils in this area is a high priority, and they share their experiences about how they promote the Welsh language and culture within their schools enthusiastically.

In addition to working within a cluster, Welsh medium primary schools meet as a discrete cluster and work to promote the language and culture within their local communities effectively. Officers work closely with schools to produce material which promotes the benefits of bilingualism amongst parents and carers. There has been an increase in provision to support additional learning needs (ALN) in Welsh medium schools. The local authority is proactive in their approach to meet the needs of these pupils.

Areas for consideration:

How well do officers capture and evaluate the impact of their actions within the WESP? For example, the addition of clearly defined timescales and success criteria are likely to sharpen your evaluation processes. How will you ensure that numbers transferring from non-maintained settings into Welsh medium school increase to meet your targets.

How will you continue to promote Welsh language education as an option for parents/carers throughout a child's educational journey?

To what extent do you share and learn from practice in other authorities, including authorities with a similar linguistic demographic. For example, Welsh language immersion, and ALN resources through the medium of Welsh.

Many thanks for facilitating the visit and I look forward to discussing the developments in the two focus areas with you and your colleagues in my link visits.

Your sincerely,

Andrea

Andrea Davies HMI