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**Dros ddysgwyr, dros Gymru**  
**For learners, for Wales**



**A report on education services in**

**Bridgend County Borough Council**

**Civic Offices  
Angel Street  
Bridgend  
CF31 4WB**

**Date of inspection: March 2026**

**by**

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education**

**and Training in Wales**

**This report is also available in Welsh**

## About Bridgend County Borough Council

Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) is a local authority in South Wales with a total population of around 147,530. The county lies at the geographical heart of South Wales.

The Chief Executive was appointed in May 2025. The Corporate Director (Education, Early Years and Young People) has been in post since March 2017. The Council Leader and the Cabinet Member for Education and Youth Services have been in post since May 2024.

The local authority was last inspected in March 2019.

Bridgend has 22,364 pupils across 59 schools. There are 48 primary schools, 9 secondary schools, 1 pupil referral unit (PRU) and 2 special schools. Of these schools, 5 are Welsh-medium providers.

Over a three-year average, 24.4% 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 Bridgend is noted below:

- 8.6% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minorities.
- 1.5% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action)
- 0.8% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action Plus)
- 0.4% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Statemented)
- 6.7% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan)
- 2.5% of pupils ages 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A, B or C)
- 7.1% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are fluent in Welsh.
- 370 children looked after (rounded to nearest 5 for disclosure reasons)

## Summary

Leaders demonstrate a clear and strategically coordinated approach to improving outcomes for children and young people. A strong vision, underpinned by the ‘Team Bridgend’ culture, promotes collaboration, trust and shared accountability across schools, settings and local authority services. Senior leaders are visible and maintain productive relationships with schools and the PRU, enabling them to know their providers well. As a result, the local authority has supported most schools and the PRU to make timely improvements, reflected in positive inspection outcomes.

The local authority has established comprehensive systems to monitor performance and provide support and challenge. Improvement partners and officers draw on a wide range of first-hand evidence and performance information to develop a broad understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. This enables the authority to identify underperformance and intervene appropriately, leading to improvements in many schools. However, there is too much variability in the quality of evaluation. Improvement partners’ reports are often descriptive and do not focus sharply enough on the impact of provision on pupils’ outcomes and progress. Quality assurance processes are underdeveloped and, as a result, improvement actions are not always precise or timely enough to secure consistent improvement.

Leaders prioritise professional learning and collaboration, providing a broad and responsive offer that supports leadership development and school improvement. However, the authority does not evaluate well enough the impact of its professional learning on improving teaching, leadership and pupils’ outcomes.

Provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and vulnerable pupils is a substantial strength. A clear strategic focus on inclusion, supported by strong multi-agency working, ensures that many pupils benefit from coordinated and timely support. The authority’s wide-ranging, high-quality specialist provision, including special schools, the PRU and learning resource centres, enables many pupils with complex needs to make strong progress from their starting points. Strong governance and oversight of out-of-county placements ensure that most pupils with ALN are educated within the local authority, supporting continuity in learning and positive outcomes. In addition, highly effective provision for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS) enables nearly all pupils to re-engage in learning, achieve qualifications and progress to appropriate post-16 destinations.

Effective collaboration between education, social care, health and other services ensures that many vulnerable pupils benefit from early identification and well-coordinated support. Services such as the education engagement team and the Communication and

Relationships Team contribute positively to pupils' well-being, engagement and behaviour. Targeted support for vulnerable groups improves participation and attendance for many pupils, although outcomes and attendance for a few groups, including those eligible for free school meals, remain too variable.

Safeguarding is a high priority for the local authority. Members, leaders and officers promote a strong culture of safeguarding and respond robustly to concerns. Well-established governance, effective oversight and strong multi-agency working ensure that safeguarding arrangements are robust and embedded across services. Schools have access to a comprehensive range of training and support, and they particularly value regular peer reviews, which strengthen their practice. The local authority places appropriate emphasis on listening to pupils, with their views contributing meaningfully to the self-evaluation of safeguarding arrangements. As a result, schools and the PRU have a clear understanding of expectations, and pupils benefit from a safe environment that supports their well-being and readiness to learn.

The authority has a coherent approach to strategic planning and resource allocation. Its school modernisation programme and Welsh in Education Strategic Plan are well aligned to local and national priorities. Effective use of capital funding, particularly the strong link between investment and pedagogy in early years provision, improves learning environments and supports high-quality teaching.

Messages and evaluations from a youth work inspection that was undertaken shortly before this inspection have helped to inform the wider local government education services inspection, where relevant.

## **Recommendations**

- R1      Sharpen the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning, ensuring that actions have useful success criteria and evaluations focus on the impact that actions have on the outcomes of children and young people

## **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 during the inspection.

## Main findings

### Education services and their impact

#### **How well does the local authority support and challenge its schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning and school leadership?**

The local authority has a clear vision for providing high quality education and improving outcomes for all children and young people. Senior officers are highly visible and communicate high expectations with schools. They have developed productive relationships with school leaders which has helped them to know their providers well. The strong 'Team Bridgend' collaborative culture is embedded across schools and the pupil referral unit (PRU) and amongst local authority officers.

Schools and the PRU value the support provided by improvement partners employed by the local authority. Improvement partners have established valuable links with other education services, for example behaviour support and additional learning needs (ALN) support. These links help the improvement partners to provide timely and beneficial support to their schools. Improvement partners gather a wide range of first-hand evidence from school and PRU visits to inform their judgements about individual providers' performance. This has helped the local authority to develop a broad understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in provision in their schools.

There are regular opportunities for officers to discuss school performance and review the support and challenge being provided to individual schools. This is supported well by the local authority's performance and financial management system which provides a helpful overview of a wide range of aspects of each provider's work. Although this has enabled local authority officers to target appropriate support and challenge where it is required, there is too much variability in the quality of information included in the improvement partners evaluations. Overall, their evaluations describe provision in schools and do not always focus well enough on the impact of provision on improving pupils' outcomes. This means that actions to secure improvement are not always precise enough. This is in part because the quality assurance of improvement partners' work is underdeveloped.

Over time, schools and the PRU have benefited from a range of appropriate leadership training and support to develop and improve leadership at all levels. Improvement partners helpfully provide specific and bespoke support for individual and clusters of schools when this is needed. Headteachers and deputy headteachers benefit from regular opportunities to meet with each other, facilitated by the local authority, to share effective leadership practice. The support given to special schools and the PRU from local authority officers is particularly effective. The officers have the skills needed to provide valuable advice and challenge to leaders in these providers. Improvement partners develop strong

relationships with governing bodies, providing advice, guidance and professional learning that helps governors to understand school performance and to support improvement.

Generally, the local authority is swift in identifying and addressing any underperformance in their schools and the PRU. They use their statutory powers appropriately to provide additional support and challenge, when needed. This has led to many providers making timely improvements in their work. There are a very few cases where the local authority has relied too heavily on external partners to identify shortcomings in providers. However, they have acted proactively on learning from instances when others have identified weaknesses in schools that officers had not previously recognised.

The local authority's cluster model for improvement partners' work has strengthened collaboration between providers and supported them to share strategies to address improvement priorities. Local authority officers collaborate well with each other to provide specific support for providers where needed due to their range of expertise and experience. Schools and the PRU benefit from being signposted to other schools with particularly effective practice in specific areas. Providers also have access to bespoke cluster and whole authority professional learning to help target common areas for improvement.

The local authority works closely with the regional consortium to help ensure that their professional learning offer is beneficial to meet the needs of their schools and the PRU. This includes access to worthwhile cluster and individual school-based support and training. However, the local authority's evaluation of the impact of their own professional learning offer and that of the regional consortium is not fully effective in judging the impact of professional learning on improving teaching, pupils' outcomes and leadership.

Over time, inspection outcomes in schools and the PRU in Bridgend have been positive. Since April 2022, we have inspected 46 of the 60 schools in Bridgend, including the two maintained special schools, and the PRU. This includes five secondary schools and 38 primary schools. Two primary schools required special measures. No secondary schools, special schools or the PRU, were judged to require any level of statutory follow-up.

### **How effective is the local authority's provision for children and young people with ALN?**

The local authority offers effective provision to support children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN). There is strong and coherent leadership placing inclusion at the heart of the authority's work. Officers have developed positive and trusted working relationships with schools.

Inclusion officers have developed an inclusive education system that enables children and young people to access specialist provision that meets their needs effectively either in

mainstream settings or specialist provision. However, leaders acknowledge that current specialist capacity does not fully meet rising levels of need.

The local authority's specialist provision is wide-ranging and of high quality. Provision within its special schools and pupil referral unit (PRU) is particularly effective in meeting the needs of children and young people with complex needs. Learning resource centres in mainstream schools further enhance this offer by allowing pupils to access specialist support as part of their local school communities. As a result, pupils with complex additional learning needs usually make strong progress from their starting points.

Provision for children and young people with ALN through the medium of Welsh in the bilingual learning resource centres is a notable strength, effectively supporting access to specialist provision in their preferred language.

Collaboration between schools and the local authority is a strength of the authority's approach, ensuring that children and young people benefit from coordinated, timely and needs-led support. The inclusion team, educational psychology service and specialist advisory teachers provide effective and responsive support and intervention for schools. For example, the Communication and Relationships Team's (CART)s advice and interventions have supported improvement in pupils' behaviour and engagement across schools and settings.

Local authority officers are accessible, and school leaders value the advice and challenge that they provide. The local authority has supported schools through the publication of useful guidance documents that outline expectations for inclusive practice. The authority sets clear expectations for inclusive classroom practice, and schools and settings are increasingly confident in adapting their teaching and planning to meet a broad range of additional learning needs within mainstream and specialist settings. Further, leaders encourage collaboration between mainstream schools, special schools and the pupil referral unit to ensure that pupils with additional needs can access appropriate support and pathways. This strengthens the capacity of schools and settings to meet children and young people's needs effectively.

Professional learning for ALN is effective and is well aligned to the needs of the schools and settings within the authority. Staff benefit from a wide range of high quality universal and bespoke training, for example from the educational psychology service and specialist inclusion teams. This is improving the quality and consistency of teaching and learning for children and young people with ALN. A strength of the authority's work is the well-established network and cluster groups of schools' Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALNCos), which support both strategic planning and operational problem solving around ALN provision as well as supporting close professional collaboration between schools. These networks enable ALNCos to share expertise, develop consistent

approaches and strengthen communication across primary and secondary phases. As a result, transition arrangements between schools are generally smooth, with improved information sharing allowing schools to respond more quickly and effectively to pupils' needs.

The local authority's support for early years provision is a strength. The engagement between multi agency partners such as the local health board, the education psychology service and specialist teacher teams means that there is an established mechanism for early identification to ensure appropriate, preventative interventions for children in the early years. Transition from non-maintained settings into school is carefully managed through structured person-centred planning meetings, ensuring continuity of provision and strong partnership with families. This preventative approach reduces escalation and exemplifies the ethos of early intervention set out in legislation. Further, officers have implemented a post-16 transition protocol to ensure that learners are identified and supported to make a successful transition to post-16 provision.

The local authority has fully implemented the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018) (ALNET) and ALN Code for Wales 2021. Local authority officers provide valued guidance and practical support to schools as they embed the requirements of ALNET. School leaders and governors report that officers are responsive when schools seek advice on identifying needs and statutory processes and developing effective support arrangements for children and young people. This support helps schools strengthen their internal processes for identifying and responding to pupils with additional learning needs.

The local authority has a robust approach to early resolution of parent and carer concerns regarding placement and provision, supported by the ALN panel and purposeful, ongoing dialogue between officers and families. This informal approach to dispute resolution is very effective, resulting in very few cases escalating to formal dispute resolution or tribunal. This represents a clear strength and reflects a well-established, collaborative approach.

**How effective is the local authority's provision for vulnerable learners, including those who are educated other than at school (EOTAS)?**

The local authority provides strong strategic leadership of inclusion. Leaders are reflective and demonstrate a strong moral purpose through a well-coordinated and robust multi-agency approach that supports vulnerable pupils effectively. Self-evaluation processes are well-developed and draw appropriately on a wide range of evidence, including the Vulnerability Assessment Profile (VAP), Performance and Financial Management (PFM) system and Strategic Teams Objectives Reporting Information (STORI). These systems inform strategic planning and service development well, ensuring that most pupils receive timely and appropriate interventions.

Partnership working is a notable strength. Highly effective collaboration across education, social care, youth justice, early help, and youth and health services provides a coherent and holistic approach to support. As a result, many pupils benefit from coordinated early intervention and continuity of provision, leading to improved well-being, engagement and participation.

The highly effective Education Engagement Team (EET) plays a pivotal role in leading and coordinating attendance, safeguarding and inclusion across schools. The team has robust processes to track and monitor the support and interventions available to pupils as well as providing direct support to schools. This enables earlier identification of risk and supports many pupils at risk of exclusion or disengagement to remain in education. In addition, the authority provides valuable opportunities for pupils to contribute to service development through inclusive and engaging approaches.

The local authority provides a broad and purposeful range of targeted support for vulnerable groups, including minority ethnic pupils, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, refugees, young carers and care-experienced pupils. The support is personalised and contributes to improved attendance and engagement for many pupils. Provision for pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) is supporting improvement in engagement and attendance overall. However, attendance for this group remains below national averages, and performance for these pupils is too variable.

**Spotlight: Highly effective provision for pupils who are EOTAS leads to positive outcomes for nearly all pupils**

Provision for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS) is a significant strength. The PRU provision offers a nurturing environment, strong therapeutic support and high expectations which successfully re-engage pupils in learning, including those in tuition services. As a result, nearly all pupils achieve qualifications and progress successfully to post-16 education, employment or training.

Provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) is effective in most cases. Strong early identification, specialist expertise and robust panel processes ensure a coherent continuum of provision. Most pupils access appropriate support promptly, improving outcomes and inclusion while reducing reliance on out-of-county placements.

**Spotlight: Clear governance of inclusion means that most pupils with ALN are educated in the local authority**

The local authority has strengthened governance and financial oversight of out-of-county placements through improved tracking, panel processes and budget monitoring. This provides greater assurance that placements are appropriate and resources are used effectively. Most pupils with ALN now educated appropriately within the local authority, which is a significant strength.

The local authority has strengthened its strategic approach to promoting equality and tackling discrimination. Improved governance, reporting systems and embedded anti-racist practice within the curriculum, together with the views of pupils, increases confidence to report incidents and improve staff awareness.

Support for electively home educated (EHE) pupils is governed well and has an appropriate focus on safeguarding. Clear policies and monitoring arrangements ensure that pupils' rights and welfare are protected appropriately. Youth justice and youth support services are highly effective, providing trauma-informed and preventative interventions that support re-engagement with education and positive progression pathways. However, a recent HMI Probation report noted that there are a 'substantial number of children not engaging with their education entitlement'.

The authority has a clear and coordinated approach to preventing young people from becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). Effective use of data and multi-agency panels supports early identification and targeted intervention. Outcomes for pupils leaving Year 11 compare favourably with national averages. Leaders recognise further work is needed to improve post-16 participation and ensure sustainability.

The authority has a strong focus on trauma-informed and relational practice, supported by workforce development and specialist services such as the Communication and Relationships Team (CART). This improves schools' capacity to respond to pupils' behavioural and emotional needs. However, increasing demand, capacity constraints and financial pressures present risk to the sustainability of CART.

Exclusion rates for vulnerable pupils remain variable and, in a minority of schools, too high. Officers have worked with a range of stakeholders to co-construct the Care, Support and Guidance Framework which provides a clear strategic focus on prevention and addressing the root causes of exclusion. This is at the early stages of implementation.

Overall, the local authority provides strong and improving support for vulnerable pupils with a solid foundation for continued improvement. Well-established partnerships, effective strategic leadership, a clear commitment to inclusion, initiatives to address

poverty, and improvements in employability pathways demonstrate a clear focus on improving life chances for children and young people.

**How well do the local authority's school modernisation and re-organisation arrangements ensure appropriate education provision for all children and young people, including those in pre-school and post-16 settings?**

Overall, the local authority demonstrates a coherent approach to strategic planning and the organisation of its education provision. Its vision for modernisation is clearly aligned with national and corporate priorities and underpinned by a strong rationale for investment across the current nine-year rolling programme. Officers ensure that this work is closely linked to the priorities within the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, supporting the development of Welsh-medium provision. In addition, officers consider comprehensive assessments of school place requirements, and plan purposefully, for example in responding to local needs such as the impact of housing developments.

There is a strong ethos of teamwork and collaboration. Officers engage productively with a wide range of partners, including developers, education providers and businesses, to align key decisions and ensure that new provision is well integrated within communities. Practical examples, such as joint work to address site access arrangements alongside commercial developments, illustrate this well-coordinated approach.

The authority maintains a clear understanding of the condition of its estate through regular surveys, enabling it to target investment appropriately. Previous phases of investment have delivered beneficial outcomes, including new and refurbished buildings that improve learning environments for pupils. Recently, while the authority has encountered challenges in progressing some schemes, including site constraints, financial pressures and environmental considerations, it has maintained momentum and adapted plans appropriately.

Leaders engage purposefully with a broad range of stakeholders. They act upon the views of school leaders and pupils who contribute meaningfully to design processes. The school modernisation programme forms a central element of the authority's capital strategy and benefits from structured, multi-year planning. Prioritisation decisions are subject to appropriate challenge and scrutiny, including oversight by elected members, which provides assurance that resources are directed effectively. The design of new buildings reflects a strong emphasis on supporting teaching and learning. Facilities are adaptable, inclusive and support the implementation of Curriculum for Wales, with careful attention to well-being, safety and accessibility. Officers have sound strategic oversight of issues such as traffic and accessibility, including a clear commitment to prioritising active travel. Community use is also a key feature of designs, strengthening the role of schools as a valued resource within their local area.

There is a clear focus on developing early years and childcare provision, with effective collaboration to support transitions into statutory education. A notable feature of the authority's work is the extent to which local authority officers ensure that improvements to the physical environment have a positive impact on children's learning.

### **Spotlight: Linking capital investment with improvements to teaching approaches**

The local authority has developed a highly effective approach to the use of small capital grants to enhance early years provision. Officers ensure that funding is closely aligned with identified needs, resulting in purposeful improvements such as sensory spaces for children with additional learning needs and environments that promote sustained play and learning. A notable strength of this work is the strong integration between capital investment and pedagogy. The early years and childcare team support settings at every stage, including identifying priorities, developing bids, providing relevant professional learning and monitoring the impact on children's experiences. This coherent, end-to-end process ensures that developments are firmly rooted in effective practice and the principles of Curriculum for Wales, particularly in creating enabling environments and supporting high-quality adult-child interactions.

The authority is making sound progress in expanding Welsh-medium provision. It has increased the number of Welsh-medium pre-school providers and plans their locations strategically to support children's progression along the language continuum. In addition, there is effective Welsh-medium provision for pupils who attend Learning Resource Centres. The current phase of the school modernisation programme demonstrates a strong commitment to further developing Welsh-medium education, particularly in the primary sector. In addition, the authority has a well-considered approach to strengthening provision for late immersion to support pupils joining Welsh-medium schools. While the modernisation programme has improved access to Welsh-medium education, some geographical gaps remain.

At post-16 level, the authority works constructively with partners to ensure an appropriate range of pathways. Learners benefit from a suitable mix of academic and vocational opportunities, supported through flexible arrangements between schools and further education providers. Collaborative working, including hybrid delivery models, helps to sustain provision. For example, learners in school sixth forms across the authority can access an A-level law course run by Bridgend College.

### **Leading and improving**

Senior leaders communicate a strong vision for improving outcomes for all children and young people, which is well understood by officers, schools and other education settings,

and wider partners. This shared commitment fosters a positive 'Team Bridgend' culture that promotes collaboration, collective responsibility and a focus on improving outcomes.

The Director of Education is passionate about improving education services, and this is reflected in his visible leadership and engagement with schools. He provides committed and purposeful leadership. Together with the Chief Executive, the Cabinet Member for Education and senior leadership team, there is an established team ethos which maintains a strong focus on improving standards and inclusion. Leaders facilitate highly effective working partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders and teams, such as youth justice, the health service and the police which promotes open dialogue, reinforces expectations and helps ensure timely support when needed.

Leaders have a good track record of securing improvement in the authority, such as the progress against previous Estyn recommendations in strengthening Welsh provision and how they have increased the pace of improvement in schools causing concern. Leaders link capital investment effectively with improvements in teaching and learning, ensuring that new and refurbished environments support better pedagogy. They have strengthened provision for pupils who are EOTAS, enabling more pupils to access suitable education and re-engage with learning. Leaders have also improved arrangements for out-of-county placements, and the effectiveness of specialist ALN provision, securing more appropriate provision for pupils with complex needs. While attendance overall is strong, leaders acknowledge that there has been slower than desired improvement in increasing attendance of a few groups of pupils, particular those eligible for free school meals. Leaders are aware of the risk to the capacity of ALN inclusion teams and the financial challenges facing school budgets.

There is a strong culture of continuous improvement in the authority with established processes to monitor and review its work. The authority has developed sophisticated systems, including its performance and financial management arrangements, which provide leaders with a broad overview and knowledge of its schools. Regular and well-structured meetings enable officers to share intelligence and monitor progress. These arrangements support timely decision-making and coordinated responses to emerging concerns.

Leaders draw on a broad range of information, including data, reports from improvement partners and intelligence from services, to inform their understanding of performance. In a few areas, such as services for vulnerable pupils, self-evaluation processes are more developed and support effective strategic planning and service delivery. Overall, although there are extensive monitoring and reporting systems, self-evaluation in various education service areas is not consistently evaluative. It does not always identify precisely enough the impact of actions on improving outcomes for pupils.

Leaders have established a well-embedded approach to improvement planning. This includes suitably aligned corporate, strategic and business plans, which are underpinned by monitoring systems, such as STORI. As a result, leaders have a clear overview of priorities, track actions and respond to emerging issues suitably. However, although improvement plans are comprehensive, they focus on too many priorities given the capacity of the officer team. Success criteria and actions are not consistently precise, measurable or clearly linked to improvements in the outcomes of children and young people, and reporting is often descriptive rather than analytical.

The authority offers a broad and responsive professional learning programme that supports staff and governors effectively. Leaders prioritise national and local priorities resulting in a clear alignment between professional learning and identified needs. Opportunities for collaboration, including cluster working and school-to-school support, strengthen leadership capacity across the authority. In particular, support for special schools and the PRU is highly effective and contributes to strong provisions and outcomes. Suitable performance management processes are in place for the education directorate's officers. Leaders acknowledge that processes to quality assure the work of improvement partners are not effective enough.

Scrutiny arrangements for education services are structured well. Regular engagement between officers and elected members helps maintain a clear overview of education services. Elected members engage purposefully in scrutiny sessions that generally provide a robust framework for accountability and contribute effectively to strong democratic oversight. Scrutiny members receive appropriate guidance and professional learning, supporting them to better understand school performance and contribute meaningfully to discussions about improvement. Overall, these arrangements contribute to a collaborative approach to oversight and support the authority's ongoing work to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The local authority demonstrates a clear and proactive focus on equalities, including the experience and outcomes for learners from low-income households, providing schools with regular networking and training opportunities. It collects and reports discrimination data to Cabinet and uses this to identify emerging patterns. However, while monitoring arrangements are well established, the authority does not evaluate with sufficient precision how its interventions directly reduce incidents of discrimination.

The local authority promotes a strong culture of safeguarding. This is underpinned by clear strategic leadership, robust governance, and effective multi-agency collaboration. Safeguarding is prioritised within corporate planning, with well-defined improvement objectives and strong alignment between strategic intent and operational delivery. Leaders at all levels demonstrate a clear commitment to safeguarding, supported by comprehensive policies, regular review, and strong director-level scrutiny.

There are well-established governance structures, including effective links to the regional safeguarding board and corporate processes, which promotes accountability and consistency. Multi-agency working is a key strength, with arrangements such as the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and joint operational groups facilitating timely information sharing, coordinated responses, and appropriate challenge between partners.

Schools and settings benefit from a high level of consistent support and guidance on safeguarding from local authority officers. Designated safeguarding persons report access to beneficial advice, clear escalation pathways, and valuable professional dialogue through audits and ongoing engagement. Training provision is extensive, responsive, and well-regarded, contributing to a strong understanding of safeguarding responsibilities across the system. Safeguarding processes, including those related to professional concerns, are clear and increasingly consistent, with the voice of children and young people appropriately central.

Quality assurance arrangements for safeguarding are robust and improving. Regular audits, alongside reflective practice and professional challenge, support schools and the PRU to evaluate and strengthen their safeguarding practice. High levels of compliance, evidenced through audit outcomes, indicate a strong awareness of safeguarding expectations. This is further strengthened with the education and engagement team (EET) involving pupils as part of the challenge and review of schools and the PRU's safeguarding audits.

The local authority demonstrates a proactive approach to identifying and responding to emerging safeguarding issues. It effectively tracks and provides targeted support for vulnerable pupils, including those missing in education or placed out of county, supported by rigorous monitoring and strong multi-agency involvement. The support from the EET team is a particular strength, demonstrating highly effective safeguarding practice through robust tracking, timely intervention and strong partnership working. Officers regularly reflect on the authority's practice and on findings from national reviews and reports to inform ongoing improvement. Officers make beneficial use of the information from attendance and safeguarding audits to strategically plan for continued improvement.

Safeguarding practice is strong and well embedded, characterised by consistent approaches and a clear focus on listening to children and young people. The local authority's reflective approach to practice and learning, including from training and collaborative work, is a strength that supports and leads to continuous improvement, alongside an increased understanding of thresholds and roles within multi-agency working.

There is clear commitment to improving the provision and outcomes of children and young people in Bridgend County Borough Council. This is demonstrated through the

suitable allocation of resources to schools and settings and by minimising the level of savings required from them despite the challenging financial situation facing the public sector. The local authority mitigates financial risks effectively to schools by funding in-year uncertainties, such as pay awards or changes in energy costs. The local authority has indicated that there will be no budget reduction to schools in 2026–27 and 2027–28. This gives greater certainty for schools in their financial planning. The local authority's commitment to education is further supported by its capital and school modernisation programme. The local authority's investment in its priorities supports delivery of its ambitions.

Despite the priority given to education finances, school balances are fragile. They are forecast to reach an aggregate deficit of £5.6m, with 75% of schools expected to be in deficit by March 2026. In line with other local authorities, balances have fallen consistently since March 2022. This challenge is recognised across senior officers and reported to elected members through risk registers and quarterly budget monitoring. The local authority and schools in financial deficit have agreed recovery plans, which they review annually. The local authority recognises that timely and effective management of financial deficits ensures balanced resources remain available to pupils now and in the future.

There is a thorough and shared understanding of the financial position at all levels. Regular and honest communication through a range of beneficial meetings, including for example, the school budget forum, means that schools understand the wider financial issues facing the local authority.

The local authority demonstrates a robust understanding of individual school finances through their established monitoring arrangements. This is reported appropriately to officers through the performance and finance monitoring system. Members are well-informed through systems such as quarterly budget reporting and risk registers. This enables honest and open conversations to support informed decision-making by all partners.

Schools and settings benefit from a wide range of support and resources provided by the local authority. As a result of a broad and relevant selection of service level agreements, take-up is strong. The local authority regularly reviews and adapts its offer to meet the evolving needs of schools and settings, ensuring continued access to valued services. This supports schools and settings well to improve provision and outcomes for children and young people.

## 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](http://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.

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