



Dros ddysgwyr, dros Gymru
For learners, for Wales



A report on education services in

Flintshire County Council

**Ty Dewi Sant
St Davids Park
Ewloe
Flintshire
CH5 3FF**

Date of inspection: July 2026

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

This report is also available in Welsh

About Flintshire County Council

Flintshire has 22,175 pupils across 77 schools. There are 64 primary schools, 11 secondary schools, 2 special schools and one Pupil Referral Unit. 6 schools are Welsh medium.

Over a three-year average, 18.8% 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. In addition, evaluations from a youth work inspection undertaken shortly before this inspection helped to inform the wider local government education services inspection, where relevant.

Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Flintshire is noted below.

- 11.4% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minorities.
- 1.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action).
- 0.6% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action Plus).
- 0.7% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Statemented).
- 8.7% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan).
- 5.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A, B or C).
- 4.5% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are fluent in Welsh.

Children Looked after: A total of 270 children are in the care of the local authority.

Summary

Flintshire's education services are led by committed senior officers who have maintained a strong focus on supporting schools and vulnerable learners during a period of considerable financial and organisational pressure. Schools and partners value officers' accessibility, professionalism and willingness to work constructively with them.

The authority has made purposeful changes to strengthen its work in recent years, including establishing its own school improvement service, expanding specialist provision and developing wider approaches to inclusion and belonging. These developments are beginning to improve aspects of provision and support.

The new school improvement service is strengthening relationships with schools and provides regular advice and challenge. The authority has a strong commitment to inclusion. Specialist and outreach services provide valued support for pupils with additional learning needs, including many neurodivergent learners. There is also a broad range of work to support learners affected by poverty, including early years, youth, family engagement and community-based provision.

However, the authority has not secured enough improvement in important areas. Since 2022, the majority of secondary schools inspected have required follow-up activity. In some cases, weaknesses in school leadership and governance have contributed significantly to the difficulties experienced by these schools. Nevertheless, the authority's support and challenge have not always brought about sufficiently rapid or sustained improvement. Although officers often know individual issues well, leaders do not bring together information from across education services systematically enough to identify risks early, coordinate support and evaluate whether actions are making enough difference on outcomes for learners.

Across several services, evaluation focuses too much on activity and positive examples rather than on impact. This means that leaders do not always know which approaches are working well, which are less effective, or where resources should be targeted. Improvement planning does not always identify precise enough outcomes, timescales or measures of success. These weaknesses limit the authority's ability to improve provision and outcomes consistently for children and young people.

The authority promotes a positive safeguarding culture and recent changes to safeguarding leadership are improving communication and partnership working. However, strategic quality assurance arrangements are not robust enough. Leaders do not

bring together safeguarding intelligence, performance information and first-hand evidence systematically enough to assure themselves that safeguarding responsibilities are implemented consistently across education services and providers.

The financial sustainability of schools is a significant risk. The authority provides valued financial advice and support, but almost half of schools are in deficit or close to deficit. Current approaches have not had enough impact in preventing schools entering deficit or helping them recover.

Education remains an important corporate priority. However, weaknesses in scrutiny and strategic coordination limit the authority's ability to respond to risks promptly and secure sustained improvement. Although schools value much of the authority's support, leaders have not secured improvement quickly or consistently enough in key areas.

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

Recommendations

- R1 Address the safeguarding concerns identified during the inspection at both a corporate and service level
- R2 Strengthen strategic planning to address the risks posed by school deficits and improve the financial sustainability of schools
- R3 Improve the effectiveness of scrutiny so that elected members focus consistently on strategic risks, learner outcomes and the long-term improvement of education services
- R4 Strengthen strategic leadership and improve the quality and consistency of self-evaluation and improvement planning
- R5 Strengthen collaborative working across portfolio and service areas to ensure more effective support and challenge for schools

What happens next

Following this inspection, His Majesty's Chief Inspector 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 the local authority challenge and support its schools and PRU to provide strong leadership and high-quality teaching?

The school improvement service has recently become embedded within the Council's Education and Youth Department following the disbandment of the regional school improvement service in May 2025. In a relatively short period, leaders have established teams of Supporting Improvement Advisers (SIAs) who visit schools regularly. This has led to effective working relationships between local authority officers and school leaders. The Core Lead SIAs have an ambitious vision for the service and coordinate the work of their teams effectively. They place a clear emphasis on responding to schools' individual improvement priorities along with national priorities.

SIAs maintain an appropriate focus on teaching and learning during school visits and engage in valuable joint quality assurance with school leaders. There is an increasing emphasis on including governors in these scrutiny activities. These activities provide beneficial support for school leaders to strengthen their evaluation skills alongside officers who model effective practice. In the short period since the service was established, SIAs have become increasingly effective at evaluating the strengths and areas for improvement in teaching, learning and leadership across the schools for which they are responsible. In addition, the local authority commissions beneficial specialist SIA support for the maintained special schools and the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

SIAs have developed a strong team ethic and draw on each other's expertise to offer practical support for schools. They are beginning to take suitable account of contributions from officers with responsibilities in other portfolio and service areas. For example, at times they invite officers responsible for aspects such as attendance to join team meetings. However, this collaborative work is not planned strategically enough to help SIAs make full use of the wider expertise available across the authority. There is an over-

reliance on informal approaches to sharing information, rather than structured systems. This limits the local authority's ability to monitor the progress of schools robustly.

Since May 2022, when inspections resumed following the pandemic, Estyn has inspected 50 primary schools. One required significant improvement and one required Estyn Review. The two special schools inspected during this period did not require follow-up. The PRU was inspected during this period and required Estyn Review. Of the ten secondary schools inspected during this period, two required Special Measures, two required Significant Improvement, and two required Estyn Review. Subsequently, those schools in need of Significant Improvement or in Estyn Review were deemed to have made sufficient progress and removed from the respective categories.

There is a suitable, graduated approach to supporting and challenging schools causing concern. Officers at different levels engage in regular professional discussions that determine when schools require additional support. There are examples where support and challenge have contributed to improvements in schools, particularly in the primary sector. However, over time, actions to address concerns in secondary schools have not secured rapid and sustained improvement where necessary. Since 2022, the majority of secondary schools inspected have required follow-up activity.

The new school improvement service is beginning to evaluate the effectiveness of its work and has identified relevant aspects to prioritise in the next academic year. Cluster reports draw together conclusions across schools usefully to ensure support is tailored suitably. However, the authority's evaluations of its school improvement work are often too generous and sometimes give inconsistent messages about the strengths and areas for improvement in schools' provision and performance.

Since the disbandment of the regional service, the local authority has established a suitable range of professional learning opportunities for school staff focused beneficially on teaching, learning and leadership. In addition, officers facilitate worthwhile professional networks that provide appropriate support for school leaders at different stages of their careers. Officers identify effective practice across schools and are beginning to signpost schools to this practice to strengthen school-to-school collaboration and support. The authority ensures that school governors have access to suitable training and support resources. However, it does not hold enough information about how far governors engage with these resources or evaluate their impact on the quality of governance.

How well does the local authority support neurodivergent learners to make good progress?

Flintshire local authority is developing a more inclusive, needs-led approach to supporting children and young people who are neurodivergent, rather than relying primarily on formal diagnosis. Leaders report that this is helping schools and settings to respond to pupils' strengths and needs earlier. However, it is too early to evaluate the impact across mainstream provision.

The local authority has invested appropriately in expanding its specialist provisions for pupils who are neurodivergent, in response to increasing demand. The development of specialist resource bases in schools, the growth of outreach services and expansion within special schools and the PRU demonstrate leaders' commitment to increasing local capacity. This enables specialist staff to model effective practice, coach colleagues and provide advice and guidance that is beginning to build confidence within mainstream settings. One beneficial example is the highly effective sensory provision at Ysgol Pen Coch, which is being shared successfully with targeted mainstream schools.

A further strength is the work of Plas Derwen PRU, where trauma-informed practice is embedded across the provision. Staff use effective relational approaches that recognise the links between trauma, anxiety and neurodivergence. Through outreach, professional learning and collaboration with mainstream schools, the PRU is extending this expertise beyond the specialist setting. As a result, targeted schools are developing a deeper understanding of behaviour as communication and are increasingly adopting approaches that promote emotional regulation, positive relationships and inclusion. This is improving pupils' engagement and helping more pupils to remain successfully in their local schools.

The inclusion outreach service promotes a needs-led approach which encourages schools and settings to implement support based on presenting needs rather than waiting for diagnostic confirmation. Through specialist advice, coaching, modelling and collaborative planning, the service is beginning to help schools and settings develop more inclusive practice and strengthen early identification. Practitioners note that productive collaboration between the early entitlement team, schools, health professionals and families is supporting them to recognise emerging neurodevelopmental differences at an earlier stage.

The local authority is beginning to strengthen post-16 support for neurodivergent learners through closer collaboration with the local further education (FE) college. Officers describe increasingly well-established transition arrangements, with improved information sharing and joint planning helping providers prepare for learners' individual needs.

The local authority has established two new Welsh-medium specialist resource bases for pupils who are neurodivergent. However, overall Welsh-medium provision for pupils who are neurodivergent across mainstream schools remains underdeveloped. Leaders recognise this issue and have begun planning for expansion.

Leaders have begun to implement a forward work plan to improve the provision for children and young people who are neurodivergent. However, the authority lacks a comprehensive strategic approach to supporting neurodivergent learners that clearly defines priorities, responsibilities, timescales, resources, success measures and expected impact. This reduces the authority's ability to communicate its overall direction consistently and to evaluate systematically whether its various initiatives are collectively improving outcomes for pupils who are neurodivergent. In addition, current developments are centred predominantly on autism, with less evidence of an equally well-developed approach to supporting the wider neurodivergent population. As a result, the authority's work does not yet reflect the full breadth of neurodivergent need across its schools and settings.

Schools and settings benefit from a useful programme of professional learning that supports the development of inclusive practice. Opportunities such as Neuroinclusive Education Network (NEN) programmes, outreach support and educational psychology consultations are valued by practitioners and contribute positively to developing staff understanding of neurodiversity. Professional networks, including the ALNCo fora, headteacher reference group and cluster groups, further strengthen collaborative learning by enabling schools to share effective practice, discuss common challenges and access specialist advice.

Partnership working across education, health, social care and third-sector organisations is developing appropriately. Revised referral pathways and increasingly collaborative approaches are beginning to support a more holistic understanding of the needs of children and young people and improve joint planning for support. Schools and settings consistently recognise the professionalism, expertise and commitment of officers and specialist practitioners. Despite significant increases in demand, schools and settings value the responsiveness and practical support provided by individual services. However, schools and settings frequently report uncertainty about available health support and continue to experience delays that affect timely intervention.

While considerable information is gathered from individual services, schools, settings and specialist provision, this information is not analysed systematically to provide a coherent picture of strengths, areas for improvement or emerging priorities. As a result, leaders are

not always able to identify where provision is strongest, where variation exists or which approaches are having the greatest impact.

Leaders of inclusion are strengthening their use of performance information to monitor outcomes for children and young people who are neurodivergent. Although leaders monitor a range of indicators, they do not analyse well enough the impact of strategies and interventions on learners' attendance, exclusions and well-being. This limits leaders' ability to identify trends, target support effectively and evaluate whether strategic developments are leading to measurable improvements.

While schools and settings gather valuable feedback from children, young people and their families through individual case work, arrangements for collecting, analysing and using feedback strategically are not sufficiently systematic across the authority. As a result, leaders cannot consistently demonstrate how this feedback informs strategic planning, service design and improvement across the wider system.

How effective is the local authority's work to improve outcomes for learners from low-income households?

Addressing the impact of poverty on learners' well-being is a Council-wide priority and relevant key objectives feature clearly within the local authority strategic plan. The education service's multi-agency Belonging Strategy, developed with school leaders and partners, aims to improve attendance, inclusion and well-being for all learners, including those from low-income households. This local authority-wide, approach is developing a clearer strategic focus on improving outcomes, strengthening inclusion and extending collaboration across portfolios and services. Senior officers and headteachers ensure pupils from low-income households and other vulnerable groups are represented positively in the Young Flintshire youth forum and other learner groups. Despite a clear and ambitious vision, the pace of implementation of the Belonging Strategy has been slow.

The education service provides a broad range of well-established services and interventions to support learners from low-income households, funded through the Pupil Development Grant, the Early Years Pupil Development Grant and other Welsh Government grants. The education service provides many well-established and helpful services and beneficial interventions within its portfolio to support its work around mitigating the impact of poverty on pupil well-being and outcomes. It also delivers other provisions in collaboration with other departments that serve children and young people from low-income families. These include:

- a widespread Flying Start service
- additional provision for vulnerable learners within the Youth Service
- a well-established and effective speech, language and communication initiative across many primary schools
- a summer holiday 'Food and Fun' transition initiative
- a well-considered 'Period Dignity' service across all schools, youth service and community groups
- a beneficial 'Eat Smart, Save Better' family budgeting and cooking project across a minority of schools
- a social and learning programme outside of school for a wider group of vulnerable learners
- dedicated teams within the Inclusion and Progression Service, such as Family Engagement Officers, the English as an Additional Language, Gypsy Traveller and Children Looked After Service, The Progression Team, the Community Focussed Schools Service and the Health Promoting Schools Service

Relevant services and teams collaborate well and support each other's work productively. Staff across services show a strong ambition to improve the welfare and well-being of children and their families, and this is a notable strength. Schools' view of these services is positive but there is some ambiguity around which services they can access and the areas they cover. There is a lack of clarity around the strategic direction of some services and their ability to provide county-wide support.

The recently formed school improvement service provides suitable support and challenge to schools about outcomes for pupils from low-income families. Advisers provide helpful guidance on Pupil Development Grant (PDG) planning, spending and evaluation, and increasingly provide oversight and challenge to governing bodies. Schools engage in beneficial discussions with advisers around evidence-informed interventions. While this work is developing suitably, it remains at an early stage. Generally, schools identify that their own internal evaluation of grant spending requires strengthening. The local authority's Engagement Service uses termly well-being and attendance information from schools to target attendance and engagement support. However, the information is not always analysed quickly enough to support an early response to low attendance.

Collaboration between the Engagement Service and Supporting Improvement Advisers is underdeveloped.

The local authority monitors the use of grant funding suitably, including the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) and Early Years PDG. The authority produces a broad annual overview of expenditure, a narrative summary of provision and helpful case studies. However, reporting lacks strategic, system-wide analysis of how grant spending impacts pupils' progress and well-being. Senior officers have recently started taking action to address this.

Overall, quality assurance and evaluation of the local authority's work to improve outcomes for pupils from low-income households is underdeveloped. Leaders do not analyse performance and well-being information systematically enough to identify clear priorities or evaluate the overall impact of the authority's work for pupils from low-income households. They consider some quantitative evidence, including attendance, exclusions, language-development outcomes, progression data and levels of take-up and participation in services. However, they do not use this information or first-hand evidence consistently enough to identify strengths and shortcomings. Although the authority gathers some learner voice and opinion, its evaluations of initiatives tend to be anecdotal and descriptive.

Since 2022, the attendance of primary-age pupils in Flintshire who are eligible for free school meals has been broadly similar to that of their counterparts in similar schools. In secondary schools, their attendance has been lower than that of pupils in similar schools in around half of schools and broadly similar to or higher in the remainder. Over the same period, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals at the end of Year 11 has been variable. In around half of schools, their performance has been broadly in line with that of their peers in similar schools, while in the other half it has been lower.

How well does the local authority support and challenge schools to manage their budgets effectively, with a focus on securing good outcomes for learners?

The local authority has coherent arrangements to support and challenge schools to manage their budgets in a period of significant financial pressure. Officers have a clear understanding of the main pressures affecting school budgets, including falling rolls, increasing ALN demand, workforce costs, changing demographics and the condition of the school estate. Schools value the accessibility and responsiveness of finance officers and the practical advice they provide.

The authority provides regular budget monitoring, three-year forecasting, workforce modelling and scenario planning to help schools understand their financial position. Designated finance officers work closely with schools and tailor their advice to individual circumstances. These arrangements help school leaders and governors understand immediate budget pressures and plan for staffing and organisational changes.

Governance arrangements to oversee school budgets are appropriate. The authority has clear procedures for monitoring school balances, licensed deficits and recovery plans. Officers provide regular reports to senior leaders, elected members and the Schools Budget Forum. These arrangements support appropriate oversight of individual school finances and enable challenge where schools are in financial difficulty.

The authority has strengthened integrated working between finance, human resources, additional learning needs and education officers. This supports a more holistic approach to schools in financial difficulty. Officers consider a wider range of factors, including leadership capacity, staffing structures, pupil numbers, ALN pressures and inspection outcomes. This helps the authority provide more tailored support and challenge to individual schools.

Despite this support, the overall financial position of schools has deteriorated in recent years. More schools are in deficit and, for the first time, schools collectively moved into an overall deficit position in 2025-26. The authority understands that this presents a significant risk to school improvement and the sustainability of education services. However, its strategic response has not strengthened schools' financial resilience sufficiently.

Intervention is often triggered once schools are already in deficit, rather than when reserves are weakening. This limits the authority's ability to act preventatively. The authority does not use benchmarking, comparative financial intelligence or system-wide learning well enough to inform strategic decisions about school budgets. As a result, leaders do not always identify patterns of financial risk early enough or use intelligence from individual schools to strengthen planning across the system.

The increasing number of schools requiring intensive financial support is placing additional pressure on officers and reducing their capacity for preventative and strategic work. Although officers provide valued support to individual schools, the authority does not evaluate well enough whether this improves financial leadership, reduces deficits or strengthens long-term resilience.

The authority has appropriate arrangements to support schools with immediate financial management. However, the implementation of measures to address the deteriorating position of school balances lacks urgency. Current approaches are not having enough impact on the long-term financial sustainability of schools.

Leading and improving

Senior leaders in Flintshire show a strong commitment to improving education services and outcomes for children and young people. The Chief Education Officer provides committed, resilient and knowledgeable leadership and has maintained a clear focus on key priorities during a period of considerable challenge. Leaders across the Education and Youth portfolio understand many of the main pressures facing the authority, such as school improvement, attendance, exclusions, safeguarding, school budgets and school organisation. They know their areas of responsibility well and have developed positive working relationships with schools, external partners and other council services.

Leaders have made purposeful decisions to strengthen education services. These include establishing the Flintshire School Improvement Service, strengthening aspects of safeguarding leadership, expanding specialist ALN capacity, developing Young Flintshire and working with schools and partners to develop the Belonging Strategy. The new school improvement service is a particularly important development, and schools value the more direct relationship with the authority. The service is beginning to provide a more responsive and consistent model of support and challenge. Work across portfolios and services is developing, and there are positive examples of teams collaborating to support schools and learners. However, leaders do not yet bring together intelligence from across their services systematically enough. Too much depends on informal communication and individual relationships. This limits the authority's ability to maintain a consistently rounded view of risks in schools and to ensure that support and challenge are timely, coordinated and sufficiently sharp.

In several areas, operational leadership is generally effective, and leaders have established suitable arrangements to identify and respond to risk. Schools and partners value the expertise and commitment of officers and specialist teams. However, support is frequently stronger at an operational or individual school level than in securing strategic, system-wide change. Leaders do not always move quickly or coherently enough from identifying risk to securing improvement. This is particularly evident in areas such as schools causing concern, attendance, exclusions, school finances and school organisation. In these areas, leaders often have an appropriate understanding of the issues, but their actions have not secured sufficient pace or consistency of improvement.

Elected members and senior officers recognise education as an important corporate priority. Members receive substantial information through Cabinet, scrutiny and other council processes, and scrutiny can, on occasion, provide useful challenge. However, overall, the scrutiny of education services is not effective enough. The authority recognises that its scrutiny arrangements are not working well enough and is reviewing its constitution and scrutiny processes. In relation to education, a small number of elected members have politicised aspects of scrutiny and, at times, focused too much on individuals rather than issues. This has weakened the tone and effectiveness of scrutiny, placed considerable pressure on officers, affected their well-being and absorbed leadership capacity. As a result, scrutiny does not focus sharply enough on strategic risk, learner outcomes and the long-term improvement of education services.

Leaders use a broad range of evidence to understand the work of education services. In general, this helps them identify appropriate broad priorities. There are examples where evaluation and reflection have led to purposeful action. For instance, the authority's work on learner voice and participation is developing well. Young Flintshire, the Youth Council, school councils and focus groups provide useful opportunities for children and young people to influence priorities and provision. The Belonging Strategy, developed across education services, schools and partners, is also a useful example of evidence-informed planning. It draws on learner voice, School Health Research Network survey findings and headteacher engagement, and brings together priorities relating to attendance, inclusion, well-being, behaviour, poverty and ALN. However, much of this work is at an early stage, and it is too soon to evaluate its impact on learners' outcomes.

A key weakness in the authority's self-evaluation and improvement planning is the evaluation of impact. Across several services, leaders describe activity, provision and individual examples more effectively than they evaluate the difference this work makes to learners. This is evident in the authority's work on school improvement, safeguarding, professional learning, commissioned services and school finances, as well as work to support neurodivergent learners and learners from low-income households. As a result, leaders are not always able to identify which approaches are working best, which are less effective, and where resources should be targeted more precisely. Self-evaluation is too variable across services. Whilst some services are increasingly reflective and evidence-informed, others do not draw on a sufficiently broad or well-triangulated range of evidence to evaluate their work accurately. In school improvement, the new service is beginning to evaluate its work, and cluster reports provide useful summaries of schools' improvement priorities and planned support. However, evaluations are sometimes too positive and do not always consider clearly enough the impact of support on pupils'

standards and outcomes. In a few cases, messages about the strengths and weaknesses of schools are inconsistent, making it harder for senior leaders and elected members to have a secure understanding of school performance.

The council's strategic plan sets out a clear vision for Flintshire as a place where people are supported to achieve their potential, live well and contribute to their communities. Its broad themes of people, place and prosperity provide a suitable framework for education and youth services, helping leaders link education priorities to wider work on well-being, inclusion, communities, employment and long-term sustainability. This reflects their ambition for children and young people to feel safe, included and able to succeed. However, the link between these broad ambitions and the intended impact of specific improvement actions is not always precise enough. Wider improvement planning generally focuses on these overarching priorities, but success criteria, timescales and costings are not always clearly detailed. Associated plans across services and teams often describe actions to be completed rather than the outcomes leaders expect for learners. Measures of success are sometimes too broad or too focused on process, such as producing guidance, launching initiatives or increasing activity. This makes it difficult for leaders to judge whether actions are improving provision, strengthening practice or securing better outcomes.

Leaders give suitable attention to equality and anti-discrimination issues and align this work appropriately with wider corporate and national priorities. There are positive examples where pupils contribute directly to this work, including through anti-racism projects, Pride events and work to strengthen approaches to bullying and discriminatory incidents. The authority has also introduced useful systems and targeted programmes, including specific anti-bullying projects, to help schools identify and respond to concerns.

Senior leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting the Welsh language. They work effectively with key partners to address the improvement priorities identified in the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. The local authority is beginning to have a positive impact on learners' attitudes towards Welsh and participation in Welsh-medium education. It has also strengthened progression pathways, including for learners with additional learning needs. The authority has a well-planned approach to improving the Welsh language skills of school staff and uses bespoke professional learning alongside analysis of workforce language competency to target support effectively.

Officers have access to a suitable range of professional learning opportunities that link appropriately to priorities and service needs. In several areas, professional learning is helping to develop shared approaches across services, schools and early years settings.

For example, trauma-informed practice supports the authority's work on belonging and inclusion, while professional learning on neurodiversity, person-centred planning and educational psychology consultation, together with the additional learning needs co-ordinator (ALNCo) networks, is strengthening practitioners' understanding of how to support learners with additional needs. The local authority is also beginning to develop its professional learning offer for schools through the new school improvement service, including networks and support focused on teaching, learning and leadership and aligned with national priorities.

The local authority promotes a positive safeguarding culture in which safeguarding is recognised as a shared responsibility across all services. Leaders place the well-being of vulnerable children and young people at the centre of strategic planning and operational practice. This supports a developing preventative approach through early intervention services, family support and youth provision. As a result, agencies are generally well placed to identify concerns at an early stage and provide timely support that reduces the likelihood of needs escalating.

Recent changes to the safeguarding leadership structure within the education service are beginning to strengthen strategic oversight and clarify the role and responsibilities of the designated safeguarding person (DSP). In a relatively short period, the DSP has improved communication between schools, education services and partner agencies. In particular, stronger collaboration between schools and social services, facilitated by the DSP, is giving schools a clearer understanding of safeguarding thresholds, referral processes and their statutory responsibilities. Wider collaboration between education, social services, health, the police and regional safeguarding partners supports timely information sharing, coordinated decision-making and effective responses to vulnerable children and young people. Consequently, partnership working is a notable strength.

Well-established child protection arrangements, procedures for children missing education, exploitation panels and local and regional safeguarding networks provide practitioners with appropriate mechanisms to identify, escalate and respond to safeguarding concerns. These arrangements contribute positively to the authority's ability to respond to safeguarding risks.

However, the authority does not analyse key performance information, including attendance data, with sufficient frequency or depth to identify emerging risks or inform strategic decision-making consistently. The local authority does not collect reports on the use of physical interventions by schools. In addition, opportunities to gather first-hand

evidence of safeguarding practice across schools and other education providers are limited.

Current corporate arrangements for monitoring safeguarding training, workforce competencies and the quality of practice do not provide leaders with sufficient assurance that safeguarding responsibilities are implemented consistently across all services and providers. As a result, strategic evaluation relies too heavily on measures of activity, compliance, participation and individual case studies, rather than on systematic evaluation of safeguarding procedures and practice.

The authority recognises that its quality assurance arrangements require further strengthening. Processes for routinely bringing together intelligence from across education and wider council services are not sufficiently developed. As a result, leaders do not have a sufficiently comprehensive overview of safeguarding trends and emerging risks to challenge school leaders effectively and ensure that appropriate action is taken promptly.

Increasing demand for safeguarding support and guidance continues to place pressure on capacity. This presents a risk to the long-term development and sustainability of safeguarding provision across the authority.

The authority's medium-term financial planning processes take account of relevant factors. However, low levels of funding per resident limit its ability to address schools' financial challenges strategically. Although the authority's delegation rate to schools is slightly above the Welsh mean, per-pupil funding in both the primary and secondary sectors is below it.

In recent years, the authority has fully funded school cost pressures, for example pay awards. However, financial pressures across other services have led to cuts to school budgets and the wider education budget, affecting schools and central support capacity. In 2026-27, the authority decided to redirect savings from falling pupil numbers to help schools manage growing ALN demand.

The authority views the financial viability of schools as its highest corporate risk. With almost half of schools in deficit and many others close to that position, this issue has the potential to affect the authority's overall financial sustainability. Although addressing this is a priority, the authority's approach has had limited impact in preventing schools from moving into deficit or supporting them to recover. This heightens the significance of this issue.

The authority has not carried out a full review of its school funding formula since 2014. As a result, it cannot show that its approach now meets the needs of all learners and settings. Although it revised its formula for distributing ALN funding to primary schools from 2024-25 onwards, it has not evaluated the impact of that change.

Members of the Schools Budget Forum value the engagement and information that officers provide about both school finances and the authority's overall financial position. The forum understands operational processes well and engages proactively, but it does not play a strategic role in helping the authority address schools' financial challenges.

The school places and modernisation team uses school building condition data effectively to plan for the long term and takes innovative approaches to securing funding for school projects. The team has also produced useful updates for elected members about future pupil projections to inform budget setting. However, the authority has not linked this work fully to the wider challenge of school finances.

The authority recognises that its training and support for governing bodies do not prepare them consistently enough for the financial challenges and strategic decisions they may face. Where governing bodies have acted on the authority's advice, there are examples of a positive impact on school reserves, but this is not consistent across schools.

When reviewing commissioned services, for example counselling services and out-of-county placements, the authority considers aspects of service effectiveness and learner outcomes but does not consider costs or efficiency fully enough. Its evaluation of the impact and value for money of grant funding, including the pupil development grant, is underdeveloped. As a result, it is not well placed to assess consistently the value for money it secures.

High levels of take-up show that schools value the support services provided through service-level agreements (SLAs). However, schools report that high demand can limit the authority's ability to respond quickly in some areas.

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, 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 and other relevant staff in the local authority
- 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, 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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