

Gareth Chapman
Chief Executive
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Castle Street
Merthyr Tydfil
CF47 8AN

January 2016

Dear Mr Chapman

Estyn Monitoring Visit 30 November – 4 December 2015

Following Estyn's inspection of education services for children and young people in November 2012, the authority was identified as requiring special measures.

A plan for follow-up visits was agreed with your Estyn link inspectors, and teams of inspectors undertook monitoring visits in February and November 2014. The third and final monitoring visit took place from 30 November – 4 December 2015. Iwan Roberts HMI led a team of five inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against all of the eight recommendations arising from the inspection.

During the monitoring visit the inspection team held discussions with the chair of the Welsh Government's Recovery Board ('the recovery board'), the leader of the council, the cabinet member for education, chair of scrutiny and other elected members, the chief executive, senior officers from the authority and its partners, focus groups of headteachers and school governors. Inspectors also scrutinised documentation from the local authority, including evidence on the progress made against Estyn's recommendations.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported their findings to you as the chief executive, the leader of the council, the chair of the recovery board, the chief education officer, a representative of the Welsh Government and other senior authority officers. This letter records the outcomes of that visit.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations that arose from the inspection in November 2012. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority no longer requires special measures and is removing it from follow-up activity.

Background

Following Estyn's report in 2012, the Minister for Education removed the powers for education from Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council and in June 2013 established a recovery board.

In order to accelerate improvement, and in consultation with the Council, the recovery board delegated the day-to-day powers for education back to Cabinet and officers. This allowed the recovery board to focus on its role in challenging and supporting the authority as well as monitoring progress against the eight recommendations from the 2012 inspection.

During a period of significant change of senior managers within the education service, the authority acted swiftly and decisively to plan for improvement. It produced an appropriately detailed post-inspection action plan which included clear incremental steps to achieve the improvement needed. This was approved by elected members, the chief executive and corporate directors. It was agreed with the recovery board. From an early stage, all acknowledged the need for fundamental reform of the authority's working practices in order to remove barriers to progress and improve planning and performance management. As a result, the Council has worked effectively with the recovery board to ensure generally strong progress across its education services.

Recommendation 1: Secure better outcomes for learners at all key stages and analyse and use performance data to identify and address underperformance

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

Since the core inspection in November 2012, the authority has secured better outcomes for learners across the Foundation Phase and all key stages.

Over the last three years, outcomes based on teacher assessments at Foundation Phase, key stage 2 and key stage 3 have improved at a much faster rate than in Wales as a whole. As a result, in 2015, overall performance at the end of each stage is much closer to the average performance in Wales than at the time of the original inspection. In addition, the performance of the authority's schools is better than average when compared to similar schools based on free-school-meal eligibility, which again is an improvement from the time of the original inspection.

At key stage 4, the rate of improvement in all the main headline indicators has been much faster than the rate of improvement across Wales, albeit from a low level. In 2015, overall performance for the level 2 threshold including English and Mathematics is just above the Welsh Government's benchmark for performance based on free-school-meal eligibility. This is a marked improvement from November 2012 when performance in this measure was well below the benchmark. In addition, in 2015, performance for the capped points score in the authority was well above the Welsh Government's benchmark. The performance of the authority's secondary schools, when compared to similar schools based on free-school-meal eligibility, has

improved across all indicators.

The progress that pupils make from primary school to the end of secondary school has improved strongly since the core inspection. In 2015, pupils' progress is significantly better than expected compared to similar pupils in Wales across all headline indicators.

Since 2012, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved. In 2015, performance by this group of pupils in the level 2 threshold including English and Mathematics is in line with the average for these pupils in Wales. This is a considerable improvement from 2012 when attainment by these pupils was half that of similar pupils in Wales. Furthermore, performance by pupils eligible for free school meals has improved strongly in the capped points score. In 2015, these pupils now achieve, on average, almost three C grade GCSE or equivalent qualifications more than similar pupils did in 2012.

Since 2012, the performance of girls and boys has increased. However, the rate of progress by girls has been much stronger than that of boys. In 2015, the gap in performance between girls and boys in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics is over three times larger than the difference in Wales. This is due to the weak performance of boys in English and mathematics. In contrast, boys' performance in the capped points score has been much stronger.

The performance of more able pupils has improved slightly but remains below average when schools are compared to similar schools based on free-school-meal eligibility.

Since the core inspection, the authority uses and analyses performance data more effectively. Officers use data well to set ambitious targets, to prioritise work and to monitor schools' performance and other important aspects, such as pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. However, in a few aspects, the authority's evaluation of performance data does not sufficiently highlight important areas for improvement, such as boys' performance in English and mathematics at key stage 4.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the level of challenge to schools and use the full powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in underperforming schools

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

Since 2012, the authority has introduced good systems to strengthen the level of challenge to its schools. These include the careful analysis of performance data at school and authority level and the effective use of statutory powers to challenge the leadership and management in those schools whose performance is causing concern.

A strong partnership between the authority and its regional consortium for school improvement, Central South Consortium, help to provide a clear model of support and challenge for schools, which is proportionate to their level of need. Annual review meetings to categorise schools uses the national model and takes good account of pupil performance data and a range of other appropriate information. This enables the authority to assess the capability of a school's leadership and management to drive through agreed future improvements. As a result, nearly all schools are categorised accurately, and supported proportionately. Termly or half-termly partnership reviews of schools where performance is a cause for concern take account of an appropriate range of first-hand evidence from teaching and learning, in order to judge progress more accurately against agreed priorities.

Senior officers monitor closely the work of challenge advisers and the quality of their reports. This ensures good levels of consistency and challenge in most schools across the authority. The monitoring arrangements are effective in helping most primary schools to understand what they need to improve and to focus their work on raising standards in particular areas within agreed time-scales. However, in secondary schools, inspection outcomes indicate that the impact of monitoring on progress is not always as effective.

The regional consortium, on behalf of the authority, provides a wide range of good quality training for middle and senior leaders in schools. Useful guidance and training on effective self-evaluation and school improvement planning is helping many senior leaders to set precise, measurable targets for improvement. Peer reviews between better performing schools are developing well. These initiatives are beginning to build schools' capacity to assess their performance more accurately, either independently or with good support from senior officers and challenge advisers from the regional consortium. The development of school-to-school working to share good practice is contributing to improving standards of mathematics in many schools. The authority supports high levels of participation in national programmes to share good and outstanding practice in teaching. This is contributing well to improving the quality of teaching and learning in many schools.

The authority uses its statutory powers well to challenge underperformance. Timely use of informal warning notices and recovery plans has ensured improved performance in nearly all primary and secondary schools where standards were a cause for concern. In the few schools where these informal warnings have not led to improvements, officers issue formal warning notices of improvement. In most schools affected, these measures are instrumental in improving performance. Where low performance remains an issue, the authority has appropriate arrangements to raise the level of challenge. The system has reduced successfully the number of schools placed in statutory categories following inspection. Since 2012, only one primary school is in need of significant improvement and no schools remain in special measures.

Many governing bodies are improving their skills to hold schools to account for their performance through a better understanding of performance data. In these schools, governors are beginning to use data well to ensure more rigorous performance management arrangements for headteachers. Many governors on standards sub-committees have a clear understanding of the national school categorisation system

and apply their knowledge well when participating in their school's annual performance review.

Initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy, in particular basic skills in reading and mathematics, are developing appropriately. However, systems to analyse the effectiveness of tailored interventions across the authority are at an early stage of development.

Recommendation 3: Devise and apply better strategies to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training and build upon existing strategies to reduce the number excluded from school and improve pupil attendance rates, especially in primary schools

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

In 2012, Estyn judged that the lack of an overall strategy had limited Merthyr's progress in reducing the number of young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) and this figure remained too high. Since then the authority has appropriately prioritised this recommendation and has improved its focus on reducing the number of young people who are NEET.

Overall, for the period 2012-2014, the percentage of Year 11 pupils that are NEET has more than halved. The authority has very effective tracking systems in place and unverified data indicates that the percentage of Year 11 pupils that are NEET has reduced even further in 2015.

The multi-agency NEET steering group continues to implement the NEET strategy systematically. The group regularly reviews its work and has identified suitable priorities for action. In addition, a NEET co-ordinator works closely with schools to identify young people most at risk of disengagement. The authority has liaised well with other authorities to develop a vulnerability assessment profile that contributes effectively to this process and helps target resources to those in most need. Lead workers are assigned to pupils that are at most risk of dropping-out of education. They provide appropriate guidance to pupils and mentor them well, including through the summer holiday period.

The implementation of the NEET strategy is monitored well at all levels within the authority. For example, the scrutiny committee continues to challenge developments within the strategy robustly.

In 2012, Estyn judged that exclusion rates were too high and attendance rates in primary schools were unacceptably low. Since then, the authority has successfully engaged with consortium partners and schools to provide a clear strategic vision to improve both attendance and exclusions. This includes providing useful guidance to schools which outlines the authority's expectations of them and the services that are available.

The authority's attendance and exclusion strategies provide a broad overall vision for improvement and outline approaches to be taken by the authority and schools.

Permanent exclusions from schools in Merthyr have been historically low and this remains the case. Fixed-term exclusions of 6 days or more have reduced considerably. The rate of exclusions of 5 days or less is lower than that of the Wales average and the authority's performance is better than the average for Wales for this measure.

All schools have adopted an appropriate, systematic approach to managing attendance. The authority provides schools with monthly attendance statistics and headteachers meet together regularly to discuss issues relating to attendance in their schools. Education inclusion officers are routinely included in pastoral meetings at schools and provide verbal updates at governing body meetings. In addition the local authority provides governing bodies with regular updates and analyses of school attendance performance data. The authority continues to develop the use of attendance data with the regional consortium's challenge advisers and helpful discussions are held between challenge advisers and headteachers.

Attendance in primary schools has generally improved since the inspection in 2012 and around half of schools have improved their attendance rates year-on-year over this period. However, when compared to similar schools across Wales, based on free-school-meal eligibility, three quarters of primary schools remain in the lower 50% for attendance. During 2014–2015 the authority had the lowest primary attendance rate in Wales.

Overall attendance in secondary schools has improved since inspection in 2012. However, when compared to similar schools across Wales, based on free-school-meal eligibility, three of the four secondary schools are in the lower 50%.

Recommendation 4: Develop a robust self-evaluation framework for the work of the local authority's education services and introduce appropriate and challenging performance targets that drive improvement

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

In November 2012, Estyn judged that the authority's arrangements for improving quality were unsatisfactory. It did not have in place a robust and ongoing self-evaluation process for its education services. Therefore, the directorate's education services were not evaluated well enough to help elected members, services and managers to drive improvement effectively. Performance targets were not drawn out of effective self-evaluation and were not accurate enough to drive improvement.

Since the 2012 inspection, the authority has appropriately adopted a corporate approach to improve the way it undertakes self-evaluation. Senior members and officers are clearly committed to embedding the new arrangements across all the authority's services. As a result, the authority prioritised this work and committed the necessary resources to it. The resulting framework is suitably structured around evidence based evaluations of outcomes, provision and leadership. Self-evaluation across the education service is now well developed, aligns usefully to the Estyn framework and links well to the authority's Corporate Service Challenge Framework.

The authority's senior officers are responsible for assuring the quality of self-evaluation, both with regard to adhering to process and in ensuring the accuracy of the information produced. The chief education officer meets regularly with relevant heads of service and supports them effectively in this process. Schools contribute appropriately to the education service's self-evaluation through a good range of working groups and forums. They also contribute effectively to reviews of relevant service level agreements.

A Performance Board of senior officers and elected members challenges the education service's self evaluation report annually. The board challenges evaluations of performance robustly and ensures that suitably ambitious targets are set. The board usefully reports on the outcomes of their challenge review to the Learning and LAESCYP scrutiny committee, which monitors the resulting improvement and action plans. Key officers within the directorate are appropriately responsible for implementing, monitoring and evaluating the success of these plans. The informative and timely reports provided to the scrutiny committee contribute effectively to the committee's work.

As a result of these improved processes, the latest self-evaluation report is an accurate and honest evaluation of the education service's work. It helps ensure a clearer corporate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in the education service.

Performance management arrangements within the education services are effective in holding officers to account against the agreed targets. These targets link very well to strategic priorities across the council.

Recommendation 5: Develop a more rigorous scrutiny framework, supported by data analysis, to challenge the education services

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

In 2012, Estyn judged scrutiny arrangements in the authority to be unsatisfactory. Officers had not provided reports for elected members which analysed school performance data in enough detail to identify and address key areas for improvement. The scrutiny process had therefore not been well informed about education performance and challenge had been weak.

Since 2012 the authority has undertaken a suitable programme to develop and continually improve its scrutiny function. Following the most recent review of its scrutiny arrangements it established the Learning and LAESCYP scrutiny committee. This improvement ensures appropriate scrutiny of the full range of education services for children and young people by one committee.

Scrutiny meetings are held at four-weekly intervals. This enables it to be challenging with its work programme, with a better focus on the regular reporting of school and pupil performance. Committee members carry out visits to schools in order to have a better understanding of how their schools work. Members have undertaken specific training to help them interpret school and pupil related data better. As a result, they

now understand what data should be provided, are able to analyse it appropriately and can challenge officers effectively. Meetings of the committee are accompanied by regular pre-meeting and post-meeting briefing sessions that enhance its effectiveness.

The scrutiny committee has an appropriate and well-planned programme of work that includes robust monitoring of action plans arising from the education service's self-evaluation arrangements. It has also established an appropriate annual programme of reporting which includes end of key stage performance, NEET figures, inspection outcomes and categorisation of schools. The scrutiny committee has included useful sessions in its work programme to challenge the performance of individual schools constructively. To date, all the authority's secondary schools and a good range of primary schools have attended these committee sessions. Chairs of the authority's scrutiny committees usefully attend the challenge of service self-evaluations by the Performance Board and this helps ensure that they are aware of areas of concern.

Since 2012, the quality of reports by officers to scrutiny committees has improved significantly. Recent reports have contained a good analysis of a wide range of data and have presented an accurate view of standards compared to other authorities and similar schools in Wales. They have also included clear messages about the scale of the challenge facing the local authority and its schools.

The committee works well to challenge and support the education service and its schools. It is becoming increasingly effective in holding members, officers and schools to account for raising standards of pupil attainment and achievement. As a result, the culture of challenge and accountability is developing well.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that data on the needs and attainment of all pupils with additional learning needs, and of vulnerable groups, is used at a strategic level to identify specific issues and trends that inform service planning

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

Since 2012, the authority has provided clear and consistent messages to schools about the responsibilities they have for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN).

The authority has worked with a neighbouring authority to develop its systems and approaches to data management. As a result, the authority now has a system that holds key data across a range of education service functions including additional learning needs, attendance, exclusions and school admissions. Consequently, the sharing of data between departments within education has improved. The authority is in a stronger position to monitor performance, identify trends and determine suitable priorities for improvement. These are beginning to be used to good effect.

The authority now collects a range of performance data for pupils with ALN. Data is collected at an individual pupil, school and authority level. Standards have improved for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) from the Foundation Phase through to

key stage 4. In most cases, the rate of improvement is faster than Wales. However the authority does not consistently report on the performance of pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) and its analysis of progress of pupils by special educational needs type is under-developed.

The authority has provided useful guidance regarding the steps schools need to take to address the additional learning needs of their pupils. In addition, they provide a good indication of when it is appropriate to refer for external support.

Since 2012, the percentage of pupils on the SEN register has reduced by 12%. Despite this reduction, there has been a 68% increase in pupils with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and a 42% increase in pupils with autism. However, it is not clear how the authority is taking account of changes in ALN data to plan its provision. The authority has developed a business case to review and remodel provision for pupils with ALN and has started work on most of the project areas. However, there is no clear work plan for each of the project areas, timescales are not stated and the resource implications are unclear.

Greenfield Special School is sharing its knowledge and expertise in mainstream schools including those that have specialist resource based provision for pupils with SEN. Its work is focused and targeted and includes developing schools' capacity in relation to assessing pupils' needs and managing pupil behaviour. Mainstream school staff have visited Greenfield and observed teaching strategies that they are able to use in their own settings. Greenfield, on behalf of the authority, provides an outreach service for autism and is leading on the implementation of the person-centred planning model. This helps mainstream schools in preparing for statutory reform of additional learning needs.

The authority recently audited speech and language provision across schools. This was an important piece of work as it identified strengths and areas for improvement in both the authority and schools. For example, it recognised that language delays in pre-school children were being identified via a useful diagnostic assessment tool. It also recognised that this assessment would be useful for schools but there is currently no funding available to implement this. However, the authority does not take a systematic and strategic approach to evaluating all ALN services provided for, or commissioned by the authority.

Overall, over the past three years, the attainment, attendance and outcomes of pupils on the educated other than at schools (EOTAS) programme have improved. All pupils are registered at mainstream schools. As a result, schools have an active interest in the provision for these pupils and in their performance as they are included in schools' performance data.

The authority works well with its partners to enhance the curriculum offer for pupils who attend EOTAS. Many pupils are in key stage 4 and there is now a greater focus on pupils following courses that are accredited to at least level 1. In addition, where pupils join the provision in years 10 or 11, the staff ensure that most pupils are able to continue following a number of their subject options. All pupils follow an externally accredited course in English and mathematics. In 2015, no pupil left without an accredited qualification and all pupils progressed into further education or training.

However, the reintegration rates back into schools are inconsistent.

The authority discusses staff training needs with all mainstream schools annually. As a result, ALN co-ordinators (ALNCOs) and support staff receive appropriate training. Over the past two years, 35 staff have been accredited with a level 3 qualification in aspects of ALN that are specific to their role and 17 staff are following a level 5 qualification in leadership and management for ALNCOs. This ensures that staff are better equipped to manage ALN within their schools. In addition, the authority provides bespoke school-based training to newly appointed ALNCOs. However, the formal training for tutors that educate the most vulnerable and challenging pupils is less well developed.

Recommendation 7: Evaluate the impact of Youth Support Services in order to adjust the provision and rebalance resource allocation where necessary

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

The 2012 inspection identified that the partnership arrangements for managing youth support services in Merthyr did not know clearly enough, which services were available within the area, whether or not these were the most appropriate for young people's needs, or the difference these services were making to young people's lives.

Since that time, the authority and its partners have revised their partnership arrangements and the overarching mechanisms for the management, coordination and reporting of youth support services matters. The authority has a good understanding of the current provision and the needs of young people, and a better awareness of the impact of support services. Improved partnership working enables the authority to take a more strategic approach when planning future services.

A key driver of the new partnership arrangements was the establishment of the youth support services steering group. The steering group secured a baseline of intelligence on youth support services, including information on the range of provision available, the location of services, their purpose, curriculum and the levels of take up by young people.

From the information collected, the steering group has produced a comprehensive needs analysis which links directly to the Local Service Board's overarching Single Integrated Plan. The steering group quickly identified gaps in the provision and found that young people had limited knowledge about what was available and that the existing provision was under-used. Also, the research showed there was no Welsh-medium youth work provision available. In addition, access to mental health support services for young people was poor, and there was little or no take up by young people of a substance misuse support service in the area. The steering group quickly took appropriate steps to put in place actions to address these deficiencies.

More recently, there has been a further analysis of provision against the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. This has identified that there is a need for more specialist provision for young people with complex needs.

The authority has also reviewed the services under its control, such as those funded through Families First and Communities First to make sure that plans in these areas are linked well to the Single Integrated Plan. This has led to improved working across services.

The authority works well in partnership with the voluntary sector through its partnership with the Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil and the providers' network. This has enabled an improved understanding of provision in this area and is giving lead workers better opportunities to meet the needs of young people. However, wider communication with young people, parents and professionals about the range and effectiveness of these services is at an early stage of development.

The authority provides valuable opportunities for young people to express their views. The authority has worked very well in partnership with young people to develop programmes and to refine support processes that respond to current needs and issues.

Changes to the corporate structure have resulted in the youth support service directing its work more successfully to meet the strategic priorities of the authority. Better use of data and greater coordination of services has helped the youth service to support children and young people to engage with learning and to increase their chances of employment.

The authority's drive to evaluate services in terms of value for money and impact on outcomes has provided a useful structure for youth support services to assess how well they make a difference to the lives of young people. Progress reports now include specific impact made against national benchmarks. This has given the authority a much better understanding of the effectiveness of programmes and services. The data shows that there is a positive impact in many areas, such as a decrease in the first-time entrants into the youth justice system, and in the percentage of young people gaining national accreditations, which, at 36%, is significantly higher than that of the Welsh average. In some instances, the authority has decommissioned work where there is no evidence of impact, and reduced duplication to create more efficient services. The youth support service is beginning to use their assessment, together with information from its partnership working, surveys and youth voice to inform its future work and to target resources more effectively.

Recommendation 8: Develop and implement systems to judge whether initiatives and services have a positive impact on children and young people and offer good value for money

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

At the time of the inspection, the authority lacked systems to judge the impact of initiatives and services for young people, and this impeded the authority's ability to plan effective service improvements and to make efficiency savings.

Following the inspection, the authority has put in place a comprehensive suite of

systems designed to evaluate the impact of services and initiatives in terms of the outcomes achieved by learners. The authority is using these systems well to judge the impact of spending on outcomes and service quality. This places the authority in a much better position to make spending decisions that are directed effectively towards key priorities. The strategic approach taken to service planning has also enabled the authority to identify efficiency savings without having a negative impact on the effectiveness of services.

The authority has a much better understanding of the value-for-money provided by schools and youth services. Improved use of data and tracking of pupils' performance has helped schools and youth services to set more ambitious targets for improvement and to track learners' outcomes more regularly and more rigorously. The collection and analysis of data also enables the authority to monitor authority-wide initiatives, such as the basic skills strategy, to identify more effectively where spending is inefficient, and to redirect funding where appropriate.

The authority has used this systematic approach to evaluate the impact of the regional consortium's work with its schools. This allows the authority to direct the consortium's education services to specific areas for improvement more efficiently, and to hold the consortium to account for the quality of its work more effectively.

The Schools' Forum provides a very valuable opportunity to involve its schools directly in making funding decisions. The authority uses the forum well to review the value-for-money provided by targeted funding. The forum has also evaluated the quality and impact of service level agreements with schools. This has led to improved cost-effectiveness of service delivery, and has resulted in financial savings for schools and the authority.

The authority has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of financial management in its schools. Officers work well with headteachers to develop their financial planning and manage financial risks appropriately.

Overall, the authority's work with its schools and youth services provides a sound platform from which to identify the most efficient and effective initiatives and use of grant funding, and to share good practice in supporting learners to achieve better outcomes.

Next steps

Merthyr local authority has made generally strong overall progress since the 2012 inspection. It must now ensure that there is no let-up in the drive for improvement in its education services.

There are a few important areas covered in our report that require particular attention. For example, attendance rates in the primary sector need to improve further. Also the authority should continue to develop those areas it has identified for improvement in order to meet the needs of all pupils with additional learning needs and vulnerable groups. It should ensure that it has effective arrangements in place to monitor and evaluate systematically all ALN services provided for, or commissioned by the authority.

Your link inspectors will continue their work with the authority, in their usual link role. I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and the Auditor General for Wales for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Auditor General for Wales