



Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

A report on education services in

Conwy County Borough Council

**Bodlondeb
Conwy
LL32 8DU**

Date of inspection: November 2023

by

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

This report is also available in Welsh

About Conwy County Borough Council

Conwy County Borough Council has a total population of around 114,828. The local authority maintains 51 primary schools, seven secondary schools and one special school. The authority also maintains two pupil referral units. The Chief Executive began in post in December 2022, the Director of Social Care and Education was appointed in 2012 and the Head of Education in 2016. The Leader of the Council has been in post since 2021 and the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services began in post in 2019.

The local authority's last inspection was conducted in 2011. Conwy County Borough Council is one of six local authorities within the north Wales regional school improvement service (GwE). In 2023-2024, the local authority's net education budget is around £117,868,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2023-24 is £5,613, which is above the Welsh average of £5,386.

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 Conwy is noted below:

- Over a three-year period, 20.8% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have been eligible for free school meals, which is slightly below the Welsh average of 22.8%. Eight point three per cent (8.3%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 come from ethnic minority backgrounds, which is below the Welsh average of 14.3%
- A total of 215 children are looked after by the local authority
- Sixteen point one per cent (16.1%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning needs or special educational needs which is above the Welsh average of fourteen point seven per cent (14.7%)
- Three point one per cent (3.1%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language (A,B or C) which is below the Welsh average of five point one per cent (5.1%) of pupils
- Eleven point seven per cent (11.7%) of pupils aged 5 to 15 are fluent Welsh speakers, which is below the national average of 14.7%

Summary

Senior leaders and elected members are committed to ensuring effective education for children and young people in Conwy. These aims are reflected well in the strategic priorities and values of Conwy County Borough Council. There is a clear focus on education and skills as well as other key cross-cutting themes which impact on the lives of children, young people and their families. This is beginning to have a positive impact on the work of the local authority, including extending Welsh-medium provision in schools.

The strong team ethos, together with the positive attitude of senior leaders, elected members and officers, helps to drive continuous improvement across the local authority. A strong vision for improvement and a culture of openness and transparency ensure that appropriate stakeholders are aware of the authority's strengths and areas for development. Although self-evaluation processes are well established, plans for improvement do not always sufficiently define measurable, achievable actions for improvement.

Overall, Conwy's education improvement officers know the local authority's schools well. Officers work well with supporting improvement advisers (SIAs) from the regional school improvement service (GwE) to support schools and settings. The local authority holds the school improvement service suitably to account for the quality and impact of its work and helps to ensure that the professional learning delivered meets the needs of their schools and settings. SIAs gather and share a range of first-hand evidence on the quality of teaching and provision, but their work does not consistently focus well enough on the progress that pupils make.

Officers provide a broad range of services to support pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) in mainstream schools well. There has been a suitable focus on building capacity in schools and officers have responded well to the increase in demand for services. A notable strength of the work of the ALN service is their commitment to providing equitable provision for learners in Welsh and English. Local authority officers have provided worthwhile professional learning, for schools and settings on the implementation of the ALNET (Wales) Act 2018 transformation programme. However, the authority do not evaluate the impact of their work to support ALN provision well enough.

The local authority works effectively through integrated services to provide valuable support for families to help children and young people to engage with education. The establishment of its network of Conwy Family Centres is at the heart of this work. The Youth Service complements this work effectively, providing a broad range of beneficial opportunities for young people. Although the authority shows a clear commitment to improving attendance, the attendance rates remain low and improvements across schools have been varied.

The local authority has a clear and purposeful vision to develop the provision for the Welsh language. The development of the Welsh language is a key priority in the Corporate Plan, with a clear commitment from senior leaders and elected members to promote and increase the use of the language across Conwy. The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan provides a useful mechanism to support this work in the

authority's schools and settings. A notable feature is the work of the Welsh Advisory Team that supports staff in both Welsh and English-medium schools. This helps to improve schools' understanding of effective pedagogy to support pupils' language development and increases their confidence in teaching the Welsh language.

Over time, the inspection outcomes of schools in Conwy vary, although more recently, since February 2022, the proportion requiring follow-up activity by Estyn has decreased. Overall, outcomes are positive and two primary schools, one pupil referral unit and two non-maintained nursery settings were asked to submit a good practice case study. During the same period, evaluations of well-being have been consistently strong, with most pupils showing positive attitudes to learning.

Recommendations

- R1 Sharpen processes to improve attendance in the authority's schools and PRUs
- R2 Refine approaches to improvement planning and ensure that ongoing monitoring and evaluation focuses on the impact of the local authority's work on learners' outcomes and progress

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 through the inspection process. The local authority should update its plans within three months of the publication of the inspection report.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare a case study on its work in relation to supporting vulnerable young people through integrated service working for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Outcomes

We were unable to provide a full evaluation of outcomes. This is due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the inspections of schools and most other education providers to be suspended since March 2020. It is also due to the lack of data on outcomes that can be compared over time because the pandemic caused changes to the way that qualifications were awarded. This also affected most of the other data that we consider when making evaluations, such as school attendance, school exclusions and post-16 learner destinations, but we have recently begun to receive this type of data again. Any evaluations that follow provide a context by

reporting pre-pandemic outcomes or relate to more recent outcomes where the evidence base is valid and reliable.

Over time, the inspection outcomes of schools in Conwy vary. Between September 2017 and March 2020, we inspected 33 schools and settings. This includes 23 primary schools, two secondary schools, one special school and seven non-maintained nursery settings. Of the primary schools, nine were judged to be in need of follow-up activity, including one school placed in Special Measures. Two secondary schools were judged to be in need of Estyn monitoring category. Four non-maintained settings were judged to require follow-up activity. As a result of improvements, none of these providers remain in follow-up.

Since February 2022, when we resumed school inspections following the pandemic, 38 settings have been inspected. This includes 15 primary schools, two secondary schools, eighteen non-maintained nursery settings and two pupil referral units. Overall, outcomes are positive and two primary schools, one pupil referral unit and two non-maintained nursery settings were asked to submit a case study to share effective practice. However, three primary schools were judged to need follow-up activity, including one in Estyn Review and two placed in Special Measures. In addition, one secondary school and two non-maintained nursery settings were also judged to require follow-up activity.

Between 2017 and 2019, the performance of four secondary schools in Conwy was in line with, or better than, what is expected in key stage 4. The performance of the other three secondary schools was generally lower than expected. Pupils who are eligible for free school meals generally performed in line with national averages.

The judgment on well-being and attitudes to learning was good or better in most of the inspections in Conwy during the inspection cycle from September 2017 to March 2020. Of the 26 schools inspected during this period, well-being and attitudes to learning were good or better in 24 of them, including five being judged as excellent. The other two schools were judged to be adequate. Since we resumed school inspections in 2022, evaluations of well-being have been consistently strong. A common feature are positive judgments in relation to pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour in lessons and around the school, and the low number of exclusions in the local authority over time. Over the three years up to 2021, the fixed-term exclusion rate was lower than the national average in two of the three years. Over the same period, the rate of permanent exclusions was lower than national averages.

Overall, attendance levels remain notably below what they were before the pandemic. Nearly all young people continue in education and training, or gain employment after leaving school. School and PRU staff along with local authority officers, youth workers and external partners, provide suitable support to assist vulnerable learners to gain the life skills they require, and to assist them to achieve their work or study aspirations.

Members of the Youth Council contribute appropriately to the democratic process. They attend relevant council meetings and make decisions, for example by sharing their views about funding applications from youth clubs and allocating various grants. They also contribute to a few strategic areas, for example by providing feedback on the Conwy Cultural Strategy.

Education services

How well does the local authority support its schools and settings to improve teaching and leadership?

Overall, the local authority provides strong support to improve the quality of teaching and leadership in its schools and settings. It works well with its regional school improvement service to deliver an appropriate range of universal and targeted and support for leaders and staff. Conwy's education improvement officers know the local authority's schools well. To complement the information provided by the regional school improvement service, officers are developing coherent systems to evaluate how effectively schools are managing wider elements of their work, such as finance, human resources (HR), attendance or support for pupils with additional learning needs. However, this work is in the early stages of development.

The regional school improvement service has established a helpful digital system to strengthen the information sharing process. As a result, officers have access to a wide range of visit reports and information about Conwy schools and settings. These provide a strong basis for regular progress meetings between the local authority and the regional service.

Education improvement officers and supporting improvement advisers (SIAs) from the regional school improvement service have productive working relationships. They regularly consider the main issues in relation to individual schools, clusters and Conwy's overarching priorities.

In general, SIAs build positive relationships with their schools. The local authority uses the information SIAs provide well and have established productive methods to gather and share information about individual schools. SIAs agree a school's individual priorities with school leaders and work in tandem with schools' own quality assurance calendars to carry out helpful activities alongside leaders in school. For example, they gather first-hand evidence through work scrutiny, lesson observations and learning walks. This enables SIAs to gather views on the quality of teaching and provision and identify suitable strengths and areas for improvement. Despite this, SIAs do not always focus their evaluations well enough on the progress made by pupils in lessons and over time.

Officers have recently reviewed meeting structures to help them to consider schools that may require additional support. These tiered meetings are beginning to make effective use of specific thresholds and triggers to identify these schools and allocate the most appropriate support. As a result, there have been improvements in the quality and sharpness of the discussions at meetings and the timeliness of any interventions. It is too early to evaluate fully the impact of these changes.

SIAs support collaboration between schools effectively, for example when primary schools work in clusters with the neighbouring secondary school to focus on a few jointly agreed priorities. The regional school improvement service provides a comprehensive professional learning offer to Conwy schools, and there is an individual support plan for each school that draws beneficially on this offer. For example, many schools benefit from the 6-step approach to developing provision for the progressive development of skills.

The regional school improvement service identifies suitable high-level priorities through their Regional Business Plan. This is approved annually by the Management Board and the Joint Committee which is chaired by the local authority's cabinet member. The local authority holds GwE to account suitably for the quality and impact of its work, including through elected members challenging appropriately in scrutiny meetings. This has helped to ensure that support and professional learning for schools is aligned well to Conwy's improvement priorities. For example, Conwy's annex to the GwE business plan for the current year includes a priority to reduce the impact of poverty on educational attainment.

Also, the authority identified the need to support new, inexperienced and acting headteachers, and GwE added valuable opportunities to address this. The local authority also offers valuable coaching and mentoring support for headteachers which complements the work of the regional school improvement service.

Overall, school governors receive a beneficial range of guidance and professional learning. This includes support to understand national priorities and, for example, with the appointment of headteachers.

How well does the local authority provide support for learners with additional learning needs within mainstream schools?

The Local authority provides a broad range of services that support pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) in mainstream schools well. This provision includes the central advisory and specialist outreach services and local authority funded additional learning provision. Fifteen English and Welsh-medium primary and secondary schools in Conwy host a local authority resource base provision for pupils with ALN. In response to an increase in demand, the authority has recently opened a new secondary provision for neurodivergent learners at Ysgol Aberconwy. Overall, the authority offers valuable provision for learners equitably in Welsh and English across the county. This is a strength of the local authority's provision. Over the last three years inspection reports of mainstream schools in Conwy reflect a consistently strong provision for additional learning needs.

School leaders have a good understanding of how to access local authority specialist support and welcome the timely advice and guidance officers provide. The local authority has developed a helpful ALN toolkit and principles document for schools which captures the authority's expectations in developing inclusive school practices. These help the authority to make informed decisions about the appropriate and necessary additional learning provision for pupils. In addition, arrangements for referrals to specialist panels are clearly understood by schools.

Conwy's ALN service provides a suitable range of support services. This includes educational psychology, sensory support, specialist speech and language disorder outreach, autism outreach, school-based counselling, ALN inclusion officers and learning support teachers. Where appropriate, they complete assessments and provide beneficial universal and specialist advice and intervention for the inclusion of children with ALN. Officers successfully carry out their duties working with pupils, their families, schools and other agencies. The local authority delivers helpful professional learning opportunities for its central advisory and specialist staff. This is coordinated to respond to areas of identified need such as emotional literacy and

neurodevelopmental profiles. This is helping officers to respond to areas that are important to their specialist contexts. Arrangements for evaluating the impact of professional learning upon pupil outcomes and professional practice is limited.

Overall, the local authority gathers evidence relating to pupil progress through fora such as Inclusion teachers' ALN review, individual pupil reviews and psychology planning meetings. However, across the service, the range of data and information is not used well enough to evaluate pupils' progress or to identify priorities for improvement.

Schools and officers collaborate effectively with other agencies such as the community paediatric team and speech and language therapists, to provide guidance and support for pupils with ALN and their families. They have co-operated successfully to produce beneficial resources such as the ALN toolkit as well as contributing to considerations at moderation panels. This approach enables practitioners to meet pupils' needs holistically.

The authority's ALN service has focused successfully on responding to and implementing its statutory duties in response to the principles of the ALNET (Wales) Act 2018 transformation programme. Local authority officers have provided worthwhile professional learning, support and resources for schools to support these developments. For example, they have provided comprehensive training sessions for Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators (ALNCOs) and have provided them with a useful ALN guidance toolkit and an accessible digital platform. This digital resource provides direct access to relevant individual development plan information for all schools and helps promote consistent practice across schools and the authority. In addition, officers promote collaboration among schools to support them with implementation of the new legislation. Many school leaders appreciate the support provided by officers.

The authority has established productive and supportive relationships with parents and carers. It ensures that families have access to a range of useful information and services. Local authority officers provide valuable ongoing support to individual families of learners with ALN. In addition, the local authority website provides an overview of services that parents can access, including their rights in relation to appeal and dispute resolution.

The ALN service does not have a systematic approach to the quality assurance of its central service or mainstream resource provisions. It is not clear how leaders use key data and first-hand information to evaluate the quality of provision or its impact on pupil progress.

How effective is the local authority in supporting families to help children and young people engage in education?

The local authority provides valuable support for families to help children and young people to engage with education. There is a well-established and effective culture of cross-service working, exemplified clearly by the services offered in Conwy Family Centres. These are based on sites throughout the authority and provide safe and welcoming facilities that offer a range of valuable support services for children, young

people and their families. Leaders and staff at these centre value the importance of their work and recognise that everyone needs help at some point in their lives.

Local authority staff work closely with colleagues from the health service at the family centres, for example to ensure that children access education via Flying Start provision at the earliest opportunity. Staff identify emerging needs well and adapt the provision accordingly, including introducing a programme to support families to repair relationships. They also make effective use of the authority's outdoor education centre to build stronger family units and enrich young people's experiences. Families of children with ALN benefit from a range of services that help them to engage with education. The Conwy Family Information Service shares resources and relevant information with parents for example, they highlight the childcare options available in the early years.

The Youth Service provides a broad range of beneficial activities for young people. This includes both open-access and targeted provision, as well as one-to-one support where appropriate. The service is proactive in the way it supports vulnerable young people to engage with provision. For example, they run a project that helps to build confidence and resilience in small group settings so that socially isolated young people can re-engage with the wider community. The Youth Service also works closely with schools, supporting aspects of the school curriculum where appropriate. This includes tailoring the provision to suit individual needs, for example, by writing and delivering an accredited course about healthy diet and exercise to inspire a group of pupils disengaged with school physical education lessons.

The volunteer and peer support programme provides worthwhile opportunities for disengaged young people to develop new skills and foster positive attitudes towards education or the world of work. For example, young people learn about safeguarding, codes of conduct and being a positive role model before they deliver non-traditional sport sessions.

The local authority provides free transport to young people in temporary accommodation, to their places of study or work. Staff from the Youth Homelessness Project provide effective support for young people to develop important skills. For example, they worked with a third-sector organisation to co-design and deliver a course for a group of young people with a focus on life skills such as cooking and budgeting.

The Conwy education social work service uses a range of approaches to address low attendance or persistent absences in schools. These include assigning Educational Social Workers and Educational Welfare Officers to support specific families, where schools buy in to the service. Where appropriate, the authority makes suitable use of its statutory powers to tackle persistent absenteeism. Families and schools have access to useful resources to assist in specific situations. For example, the educational psychology service offers a package to support those affected by emotion-based school avoidance. The local authority provides a suitable counselling service for pupils. Officers have recently developed a useful tracking system to assist in analysing attendance data in schools across the authority. However, use of this tool is at an early stage of development.

Overall, attendance levels remain lower than they were before the pandemic and the rates of persistent absence in many secondary schools remains too high. Interventions to address these shortcomings have not yet had enough impact on improving attendance levels.

How effective are the local authority's arrangements for developing the Welsh language?

The local authority has a clear vision for the development of the Welsh language across its schools and settings. Senior leaders work collaboratively to ensure that the promotion of the language is at the heart of the council's work. The local authority is responding well to the Welsh Government's aspiration for a million Welsh speakers by 2050 by identifying opportunities for the planning and development of Welsh language and Welsh medium education. This is communicated well to others across the county through a range of sources, including the Welsh Language Promotion Forum.

The local authority's Welsh in Education Strategy Policy provides a useful mechanism for officers, elected members and wider partners to understand key priorities and actions. Senior leaders, elected members, officers and stakeholders work proactively to implement a range of initiatives to meet the aims and objectives across all sectors. This is helping to secure a strong commitment to improving the provision of the Welsh language across the local authority. For example, officers support two clusters of English-medium primary schools who wish to increase Welsh-medium provision. In these schools, the authority provides leaders, staff, governors and parents with purposeful guidance and support to help pupils improve their Welsh language skills.

Officers use a range of information appropriately to identify ways in which they can develop Welsh-medium childcare and early education provision across the authority. They work purposefully with a range of umbrella organisations and external partners to plan and establish suitable Welsh-medium provision in specific areas. For example, officers have supported the establishment of Welsh-medium Flying Start centres in specific areas to support children and families.

Leaders and officers make appropriate use of Welsh Government grants and funding including capital from Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme to invest in new provision to meet the increasing demand for early years Welsh-medium education.

The work of the local authority's Welsh Advisory Team is a notable strength. The team provides a helpful range of professional learning and shares beneficial resources to improve pedagogy. This is helping leaders and staff in schools to develop a clear understanding of the most effective approaches to teaching the Welsh language. Across all sectors, the Welsh Advisory Team works diligently to enrich pupils' Welsh language experiences and to learn about the Welsh culture through the 'Siarter Iaith' and 'Cymraeg Campus'. This work supports the work of schools well as they try to encourage more pupils and young people to speak Welsh in formal and informal situations, especially as they move from one sector to another. The team also supports all language immersion provision across the authority effectively. These centres help to ensure that pupils who may have missed out on Welsh-

medium early education can have access to their learning through the medium of Welsh.

Officers from the regional school improvement service provide suitable Welsh language support for schools, especially secondary schools. In the strongest examples, they support staff to promote the Welsh language and the benefits of bilingualism with pupils across the whole school as well as providing useful subject specific advice and guidance.

The local authority provides good opportunities for staff to develop their Welsh language skills to support pupils' learning. For example, they identify staff's language competency and provide purposeful learning opportunities that help staff gain confidence and skills to teach pupils through the medium of Welsh. In addition, officers have a clear ambition to employ a range of Welsh speaking specialist professionals to support pupils with ALN and their families through the medium of Welsh.

Leadership and management

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for ensuring effective education provision in Conwy. The corporate plan reflects relevant national and local priorities well, including suitable considerations for the needs of future generations. Through this, leaders take good account of the needs of children and young people, including the development of many relevant cross-cutting themes, such as their ambition to tackle the effects of poverty and in supporting and promoting the Welsh language. The leader, chief executive, cabinet member for education and senior officers work closely together to lead services for children and young people well.

Leaders have been successful in implementing many strategic initiatives, such as their clear ambition for increasing Welsh-medium provision for learners in Conwy. They have considered the views of stakeholders and engaged well with other partners when considering future Welsh-medium provision. Although the local authority's overarching Anti-Poverty Strategy is relatively new, it is helping to bring coherence to a wide range of established initiatives and activities which are beginning to help reduce the impact of poverty on the outcomes and well-being of groups of learners.

The Strategic Director of Social Care, the Head of Education and education service managers work well as a team. Together, they have developed an enthusiastic team of staff who understand and discharge their roles and responsibilities well, collaborating conscientiously in driving forward priorities.

The Chief Executive, senior officers and elected members understand well the challenges facing the education service. The Leader of the Council and cabinet member for education have a strong grasp of the main issues, and prompt senior officers to continually consider progress against education business plans. This helps to ensure a suitable sense of ownership and accountability for the delivery of the education services in Conwy. However, a majority of improvement plans within education services lack sufficient detail to enable leaders and managers to measure and evaluate progress towards their strategic priorities. For example, to provide

useful indicators around how improvements to provision might impact learners' standards or outcomes.

The Education and Skills Overview and Scrutiny Committee provides timely scrutiny on a number of relevant issues facing education in the authority. Officers and relevant partners, such as GwE, provide useful reports to the committee. Senior officers assist the committee further by providing clarity and relevant additional information during the meetings. Training for scrutiny members is good and enables them to exercise their responsibilities well. The committee makes effective use of worthwhile pre-meetings, as well as task and finish groups, which strengthen the process further. They are particularly astute in the content they wish to scrutinise and overall, they provide robust challenge to help shape and develop council policy, review decisions, as well as challenge the performance of the cabinet effectively. Through a well-considered forward work programme, they provide useful scrutiny on a number of core issues such as school organisation and the performance of schools. In addition, they bring to scrutiny a number of pertinent issues such as how schools deal with reserve budgets, peer-to-peer sexual harassment, home-to-school transport and Welsh in education within the authority. They have been effective in providing good challenge to the executive and ensured there is appropriate accountability over time.

The authority has a strong vision for improvement, which is articulated with clarity and passion by leaders at all levels. This ambition is shared by stakeholders and is delivered within a culture of honesty and openness and transparency. The authority's well-structured corporate plan outlines key objectives, which are evaluated regularly to monitor progress. Self-evaluation processes, together with the corporate performance management systems, are well established and are supported by the involvement of a range of stakeholders. As a result, leaders know the strengths and areas for development across education services appropriately. However, subsequent plans do not always focus well enough on the areas of improvement identified.

The local authority has a structured and purposeful approach to the professional development of its staff. This is underpinned well by The People Strategy (2022-2027), which provides a sound strategic focus to this work, along with the worthwhile performance management arrangements for individuals. Officers value the support and challenge this process provides, including the beneficial professional learning opportunities that they can access. There is a comprehensive corporate programme of mandatory training for staff, which includes important, contemporary issues such as safeguarding, domestic violence and cyber security. Lead officers work together effectively to identify innovative ways in which to expand and customise the learning offer. This has resulted in an extensive range of opportunities for staff, which include aspects of well-being and Mental Health First Aid as well as a range of leadership programmes. In line with the local authority's vision for increasing the use of Welsh, there is beneficial training available for all staff who wish to learn the language or improve their skills.

The local authority has a well-established, highly valued Professional Learning Communities model in place across schools and clusters. It also works closely with GwE to develop a joint professional learning offer which can be accessed both by schools and central employees. The 'Conwy Conversation' programme is a

mechanism to engage all staff in personalised developmental dialogue, which highlights individual and corporate needs. This has had a positive impact on staff since its implementation and has supported opportunities to respond to emerging local authority staff needs, such as to develop resilience or managing the menopause.

The local authority carries out its statutory role to protect and safeguard children effectively. Relevant leaders have a secure understanding of their roles and responsibilities in keeping learners safe. A broad range of strategic and operational groups place a firm focus on safeguarding and child protection matters through regular meetings, specific projects, and authority-wide strategies.

The Conwy Corporate Safeguarding Board has a clear and comprehensive action plan that focuses well on important local and regional matters. These include, for example, the implementation of the abolition of physical punishment, pre-birth safety of the child, county lines drug supply and non-accidental injuries. The Board carefully considers new Welsh Government guidance and key findings from national reports and has well-considered measures and policies in place to mitigate against any potential risk or negative trends. For example, the local authority has a county-wide strategy to reduce the number of bullying incidents. This includes specific training for schools, support in the implementation of the strategy and a comprehensive review of impact at a later stage.

The local authority provides schools and PRUs with relevant and up-to-date safeguarding and child protection training. Designated safeguarding leads are well-supported by children's services. They receive clear advice and guidance which helps them make appropriate referrals to the duty and assessment team. The work of the local authority multi-agency sexual abuse forum (MACSAF) is helpful and supports relevant school leaders to understand how to identify potential signs of harm. Local authority officers share safeguarding information appropriately with schools and PRUs through the weekly general newsletter.

The corporate safeguarding policy is clear and comprehensive. The education directorate provides schools and PRUs with relevant policies and guidelines. Local authority officers quality assure schools' annual safeguarding audits and support schools well to make any necessary improvements. This, along with appropriate safer recruitment processes is having a positive impact on strengthening the culture of safeguarding across Conwy schools. Arrangements for the application of Part 5 of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures to respond to allegations against education staff and other persons in a position of trust are appropriate.

The local authority prioritises funding for education, and leaders have sought to protect schools from the budget cuts experienced by other services. However, this may be more challenging in the near future given the authority's current financial position and low levels of usable reserves. Historically, Conwy's net education budget was consistently above the Wales average, but in 2021-22 (the last year for which data is available) this had fallen in line with the Wales average. The percentage of the education budget the authority delegated to schools in 2023-24 is also in line with the Wales average.

The authority has a track record of spending within its education budget in recent years but increasing home to school transport costs have resulted in a projected overspend of £1.2 million in 2023-24. A review of home-to-school transport is currently underway. However, the authority is unlikely to realise any savings from this exercise until 2025-26 and any options will be subject to consultation.

The authority has a good understanding of financial challenges within the education service and there are structured processes in place to monitor school budgets and grants. Education officers and school leaders are actively identifying savings to support a balanced education budget for 2024-25 and beyond. The authority provides schools with useful support for financial planning, including effective use of data to help identify opportunities for savings. The School Budget Forum has a broad membership that includes headteachers, local authority officers, elected members and governors. This facilitates constructive discussions on a range of relevant issues, such as budget pressures and the school funding formula. The formula is reviewed regularly to ensure it remains appropriate.

Schools' balances, as in other authorities, increased significantly from £1.8 million in 2019-20 to £10.3 million at the end of 2022-23. Plans are in place to reduce surpluses and the authority anticipates overall schools' balances will reduce by around half by the end of 2023-24. Whilst none of the authority's schools were in deficit at the end of 2022-23, two schools were in receipt of loans funded from pooled surplus balances. The authority has effective arrangements to monitor balances and schools that are forecasting a deficit are required to have plans in place to address the risk.

The authority provides a comprehensive range of service level agreements (SLAs), which it reviews every two years. There is an overall high level of take up and recent survey feedback from schools is mostly positive.

Appendix 1: CASE STUDY OF INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Name of provider: Social Care and Education Services

Local Authority: Conwy County Borough Council

Contact person, email address and telephone number for further information:
tbc

Website: www.conwy.gov.uk

Date of Estyn Inspection: November 2023

Area of practice which has been identified during inspection:

The range of support provided for vulnerable young people through integrated service working.

Title of case study:

Supporting vulnerable young people through integrated service working

Inspection Area: IA2, IA3

Information about the local authority

Conwy County Borough Council has a total population of around 114,828. The Local Authority maintains 51 primary schools, seven secondary schools, one special school and two pupil referral units. These schools provide education for a total of 15,700 learners. Social Care and Education are an integrated service within Conwy and the Youth Service sits within the Education portfolio. The work and provision delivered by the Youth Service and other services within the Social Care and Education portfolio are described in detail below.

Context and background to the effective or innovative practice

Within the context of legislative changes, changes in policy directive, changes in the local dynamic and in response to a challenging financial climate, the Local Authority understands the importance of securing better outcomes for children and young people not just in the short term, but within a longer-term perspective of building resilience, becoming economically active and reducing dependency on public services. A significant consequence of this within Conwy is the successful restructure and merging of Social Care and Education Services into one integrated service. Both the strategic and operational activity across Social Care and Education is focused on the delivery of the Corporate Plan priorities. Across the range of expertise within the service there is a mutually beneficial understanding of key legislative duties and thresholds for support and intervention. The service has been designed in response to the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014, the requirements of which are at the heart of the service transformation across Social

Care and Education services, which aims to deliver a preventative agenda, empowering citizens to seek improved health and wellbeing for themselves.

The impact of the Social Care and Education integration has been extremely positive. At a strategic level, the single management team is cited on all matters relating to children, young people and families in a coordinated and cohesive way. At an operational level staff have an increased sense of belonging and a commitment to a single Social Care and Education team and vision '*Working together with our community to enable everyone to get the best out of life*'. Teams clearly demonstrate an acknowledgement of specialist areas and utilise expertise across service areas to innovate, improve practice and deliver improvements. The integration of Youth and Employability services into the education portfolio has enabled the service delivery to be seamless across communities, young people and those seeking employment.

Strong collaborative approaches across Social Care and Education are well embedded and impact positively on children, young people and their families. Clear processes are in place for early identification which enables the implementation of appropriate support in a timely manner. Support for families is well coordinated and there is a clear framework in place for early referral pathways and multiagency involvement. Families have access to wide networks of partners who can offer support and provision outside of the school environment.

Description or nature of activity

Through its integrated service approach, resources to support young people and their families are utilised purposefully and appropriately. Through effective partnership working, there is a balanced offer of universal, open access and targeted programmes which are responsive to the changing needs of children, young people and their families. Under the overarching theme of "everyone needs help sometimes", a wide range of provision, support and access is available to children, young people and families to address vulnerabilities and to engage them in education.

Under the umbrella of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework, Conwy have continued to develop its collaborative and integrated approach to working. Key services within the Local Authority such as: Housing, Education, Social Care and Police work in collaboration to identify needs, gaps and areas of improvement. Working collaboratively with internal and external services' allows officers and services to gather intelligence and evidence to ensure that resources are deployed to areas of priority.

The approach to support ensures that children and young people are accessing and engaged in education. The Local Authority has a well-established Family Information Service which provides valuable advice and information for families and professionals. The service is effective in ensuring a streamlined customer focused knowledge hub for parents to navigate when making key decisions about education provision.

Family support services in Conwy are well embedded and form an integral part of the Local Authority's approach which is underpinned by public service values of

delivering services to children and young people and their families. The Family Centre offer provides an inclusive, nurturing environment which enables children and young people to embrace adult life and become responsible, independent, economically active and resilient citizens. Family Centres are situated across five areas, aligning closely with school catchments. The model ensures that schools have direct access to a named family worker who works with families to promote re-engagement in education.

Partnership working across Social Care and Education is a strength and is a key component of the Flying Start Childcare (FSC) programme. The FSC team closely works with multi agencies and partners to support the transition into childcare and through to early education. The FSC Team works closely with the Early Years team, Portage Service, Conwy Child Development Centre and Conwy Pre-School Support Scheme to ensure children's needs are met and relevant information is shared, resulting in a smooth transition to early education. Families are provided with a range of resources and tools to support their child's educational journey.

Flying Start in Conwy has ensured earlier access to childcare for many families in Conwy enabling children to socialise with their peers and develop their early skills. The Flying Start outreach programme is available (by referral) for families who are not currently eligible for Flying Start childcare funding but who may benefit from the additional support offered. Referrals are submitted by various agencies and professionals where a need is identified.

Conwy Flying Start childcare provides valuable early intervention as a child starts their journey through childcare and education, and by working with local partners and schools, thus ensuring families can access support easily. The impact of the holistic approach can be seen in how schools have gained confidence in using and accessing interventions such as: Community Focused Schools, ELSA and Trauma Informed Schools. There has been an increase in complex and intense cases following lockdown and in response, Local Authority services work closely with schools to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

The Local Authority's Youth Service provision is situated within Social Care and Education Services. Conwy Youth Service (CYS) is effective in facilitating and supporting young people's growth through dependence to independence, encouraging their personal and social education and helping young people to take a positive role in the development of their communities and society. The structure of the service incorporates national plans such as Health & Wellbeing, Youth Homelessness, Digital youth work and reducing the number of NEET young people. The multi-service approach ensures youth voice is part of the process and have helped to shape the resources and practice of services supporting young people.

CYS provides young people with 30 open access community youth club provisions across the Local Authority and 5 targeted provisions per week. CYS works closely with schools, Family Centres and Catrefi Conwy housing hubs. The service also provides fortnightly drop in clubs at 4 temporary accommodation facilities for those young people displaying as homeless. Working with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Social Care and the School Based Counselling team, CYS has created a bespoke youth club offer for young people in need for more wellbeing focused support, creating a pathway back into social settings which build resilience

while working at the individuals pace. Targeted intervention ranges from online support, doorstep visits, wellbeing walks and smaller group sessions as part of Conwy's Seren programme.

The Seren programme evolved from previous iterations where provision of weekly wellbeing support included doorstep visits, wellbeing walks and a wellbeing mobile provision in response to increased need across Conwy. The programme provides vital support for young people who find themselves socially isolated due to mental wellbeing or disability barriers with the aim to build confidence, resilience and skills to improve wellbeing and reintegrate into larger social settings. Referrals for this programme come from a wide range of Local Authority, Health and other services including: youth, CAMHS, school based counselling, schools, family workers, speech and language therapists and parents themselves.

Conwy's Oak Tree Project is preventative project focusing on raising awareness of homelessness and housing. The programme supports young people to develop resilience, independent living skills and make informed choices about their future. Using youth work methodology, the project has been able to create bespoke resources, which educate young people through interactive, fun and informal educational activities.

The project offers early intervention and also support at the point of crisis. This is achieved by offering support to families and young people experiencing housing difficulties and homelessness. The project currently operates five open access drop-in sessions set in temporary accommodation and residential settings. These sessions are tailored to meet the individual needs of the young person and their family circumstances. The Local Authority has developed a tailored person-centred approach, which enables professionals to respond to the specific needs of families whilst also building on established relationships with young people who have accessed community youth provision, youth work in schools and targeted projects.

What impact has this work had on provision and learners' standards?

The scope of this work ensures a capture-all and clear 'no wrong door' approach for vulnerable young people and families. By engaging with families at the earliest opportunity, able to build trusting relationships, ensure that engaging with education and wider services is a positive driver for improvement.

Specific project work has been undertaken to address attendance issues related to emotionally based school avoidance and in neurodivergent learners. These projects have been responsive to discrete themes identified across agencies in respect of attendance monitoring and requests for ALP. In addition, support from school based counselling teams has led to better mental health and wellbeing for 85% of learners who engaged in sessions.

Estyn inspections demonstrate impact in respect of positive wellbeing and behaviour of learners across Conwy schools.

Provision continues to evolve and develop in response to local need and based on evidence gathered through a range of services across Social Care and Education.

How have you shared your good practice?

The Youth Service has been awarded a Gold Quality Mark for Youth Work by sharing the scope of its service and provision as well as a rainbow flag award.

Conwy Youth Service collaborated with WLGA to support and contribute to the planning and coordination of the Youth Homelessness prevention conference in conjunction with End Youth Homelessness Cymru. Examples of good practice and case studies from Conwy were shared with local government services including: education, housing, social services as well as the voluntary sector.

Senior officers sit on the Principal Youth Officer Group (PYOG) for Wales.

Officers engage in regional and national transformation work, for example, Taith i Saith. Good practice is shared across a range of strategic and operational fora including: Flying Start and Families First networks.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consult 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
- analyse 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
- carry 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 normally:

- meet 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
- look closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- consider the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinise 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 any 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:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provide 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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