



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2023/2024

CABINET

17TH JULY 2023

**ESTYN'S REPORT ON EDUCATION SERVICES
IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES IN
DISCUSSION WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION, YOUTH
PARTICIPATION AND THE WELSH LANGUAGE, COUNCILLOR RHYS LEWIS**

Author: Gaynor Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the inspection process and the outcomes of the Estyn inspection of the education services in Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council in January 2023.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Consider the information provided.
- 2.2 Consider whether any further information is required on any aspect of the report or the work of the Education and Inclusion Services Directorate.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To provide Cabinet with information on the outcome of the Estyn inspection, including areas of strength and development, and the opportunity to seek further clarification on any matters of interest.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 4.1 The last core inspection of [Rhondda Cynon Taf Education Services](#) was in March 2012 when Estyn judged Education to be 'adequate', with 'adequate prospects for improvement.'
- 4.2 In order to improve, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council was considered to require improvement in a number of key areas. Six key recommendations (R1-R6) were made, including:
- R1 Raise standards in schools particularly in key stage 4.
 - R2 Improve attendance rates in all schools.
 - R3 Improve the evaluation and analyses of data across service areas and partnerships to drive improvements in outcomes for learners.
 - R4 Use the full powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in schools.
 - R5 Reduce surplus places.
 - R6 Improve the rigour and the level of scrutiny and challenge across all services and partnerships.
- 4.3 As consequence of this inspection, the local authority was placed in a follow-up category of Estyn Monitoring.
- 4.4 Following a series of follow-up visits from Estyn, the local authority was judged to have made sufficient progress. In August 2014, Estyn provided [formal confirmation](#) that the local authority no longer required further follow-up activity due to the progress made.

5. INSPECTION PROCESS

- 5.1 Estyn's inspection of local authorities is informed by the [Guidance handbook for the inspection of LGES 2022 \(gov.wales\)](#). The handbook sets out the way in which Estyn conducts inspections of local government education services (LGES), which has changed significantly since our last core inspection in 2012.
- 5.2 A summary of the legal basis and policy background for the inspection of LGES is provided in Section 10 of this report.
- 5.3 The inspection of LGES is undertaken by a team of inspectors. The reporting inspector (RI) is responsible for the conduct and management of the inspection, for ensuring that all team members adopt a consistent approach to the inspection process and the inspection report.
- 5.4 The principles of an Estyn inspection are to:
- ensure that inspection is of high quality and responds to the needs of all learners
 - ensure that judgements are secure, reliable and valid
 - involve the local authority fully in the inspection process, including the use of nominees

- use the local authority's self-evaluation and improvement planning work as the starting point for the inspection and to inform questions about education services
- include peer inspectors in the inspection process
- keep to a minimum any requirements for documentation and preparation by the local authority
- evaluate evidence about the perspective of children and young people and other stakeholders
- apply the principle of equality for Welsh and English to all inspection work, providing bilingual services in line with the practices of the local authorities inspected.
- be constructive in identifying and supporting local authorities with important areas for improvement
- contribute to joint assessments and reports with other inspection, audit and regulatory bodies as required by Welsh Government legislation.

5.5 The LGES Inspection Framework is underpinned by three inspection areas, namely:

Inspection area 1 – Outcomes

Standards and progress overall
Standards and progress of specific groups
Well-being and attitudes to learning

Inspection area 2 – Education Services

Support for school improvement
Support for vulnerable learners
Other education support services

Inspection area 3 – Leadership and management

Quality and effectiveness of leaders and managers
Self-evaluation and improvement planning
Professional learning
Safeguarding arrangements
Use of resources

5.6 Inspectors do not inspect or evaluate all education services during a core inspection. After reviewing key documentation from the local authority, such as performance reports to elected members, strategic plans and intelligence gathered from local authority link inspectors (LALIs), inspectors choose specific aspects of education services to evaluate during the core inspection.

Inspectors do this by drafting 'local inspection questions' which are then duly shared with the local authority and feedback is sought. The final decision about the wording and focus of the local questions is made by Estyn. In the local authority inspection in Rhondda Cynon Taf, the following local inspection questions (LIQs) were highlighted for further exploration:

LIQ1: How effective is the challenge, support and intervention in improving the quality of teaching and leadership in schools and PRUs?

LIQ2: How effective is the local authority working with its communities to support the most vulnerable learners and what impact is this having, for example on improving attendance, well-being and engagement?

LIQ3: How well does the local authority meet the needs of pupils with ALN?

LIQ4: To what extent does the local authority consider appropriately the educational benefits and risks of its school organisation proposals?

5.7 Some seven weeks prior to the inspection, a citizen survey is launched to seek stakeholder views about education services, including the local inspection questions. A month prior to the inspection, all local authority supporting evidence is uploaded to the virtual inspection room in preparation for the inspection.

5.8 This is followed by meetings with key stakeholders some two weeks prior to the inspection. These preliminary activities include virtual meetings with a wide range of stakeholders including headteachers, multi-agency partners, children and young people, parent/carer representatives and trade unions. A timetable of extensive meetings is then planned for the inspection week to enable Estyn to gather views about the performance of education services.

5.9 At the start of local authority inspections, the inspection team has an opportunity to meet senior officers, including the chief executive and director of education, and senior elected members, including the leader, cabinet member for education and chair of scrutiny. The local authority nominee is also part of this meeting. This provides an opportunity for the director of education, in partnership with the chief executive, the leader of the Council and the cabinet member for education to present some contextual information to the inspection team and highlight the main strengths and areas for improvement in education. Following this meeting, lead officers are also provided with an opportunity to present some contextual information on the local inspection questions before the commencement of more formal meetings with a wide range of officers, elected members and key stakeholders.

5.10 The main forms of evidence for a local authority inspection include:

- the authority's self-evaluation of education services
- data on education outcomes in the local authority, including local data provided by the local authority
- briefings from link inspectors for the local authority and the link inspector for the relevant regional consortium
- briefings from Audit Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales, and other inspectorates where relevant
- documentary evidence, including reports to cabinet, council and scrutiny

- the views of children, young people, parents and other stakeholders such as staff in LGES, schools and partner organisations (including the findings of any of our relevant surveys and questionnaires)
 - interviews with senior leaders, officers and elected members
 - interviews with senior leaders from the relevant regional consortium and other relevant partnerships
 - interviews with officers and other stakeholders who helped inspectors to address the local inspection questions.
- 5.11 Towards the end of the inspection, the team formally moderate and agree all judgements together. Under the current inspection process, inspectors no longer make summative judgements for each inspection area but inspection teams are expected to make a summative judgement about whether or not a local authority is a cause for significant concern.
- 5.12 It is Estyn's expectation that the inspection report is scrutinised in full by the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee, so that the necessary support and challenge can be provided about the Directorate's plans for improvement.

6. SUMMARY OF ESTYN'S FINDINGS

- 6.1 The inspection of education services in the local authority was a very positive one with many strengths highlighted, and three recommendations for improvement made. The report was published on Estyn's website on the 31st of March 2023 and can be found on Estyn's website and at Appendix 1 of this report.
- 6.2 The Estyn report is very positive and provides a comprehensive overview of the inspection findings, including the Directorate's strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations.

A concise summary of Estyn's key findings is also detailed in the published report and is extracted in full below. **Areas of strength** are highlighted in bold and areas for development are underlined for ease of reference:

Leaders in Rhondda Cynon Taf education services provide clear and purposeful leadership. They are committed to ensuring that children and young people achieve their very best. The leader, chief executive, cabinet member for education, elected members and senior staff in the education directorate have set high expectations for their officers, schools and providers. All officers have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are empowered to take action to provide valuable services to improve outcomes for children and young people across the authority.

Leaders in the local authority make their decisions carefully, based on how best to serve their different communities and to meet individual needs. For example, the council makes effective

use of a wide range of data and information when considering school reorganisation and planning. This means that school organisation proposals take good account of the needs of the school's community and promote equity of provision for pupils. However, improving provision for Welsh, for example through late immersion opportunities, specialist ALN provision and improving the outcomes for Welsh in English-medium schools, is at an early stage of development.

Generally, inspection outcomes over time have been sound within the local authority. Since we resumed inspection in February 2022, we asked three primary schools to provide case studies of good practice, one primary school requires special measures, and another primary school was placed into Estyn review.

The director and her senior team work pro-actively in partnership with Central South Consortium (CSC), the school improvement service. The local authority shares explicitly its high expectations of the work of the regional consortium. For example, the local authority is clear about how CSC should support its strategic priorities and directs improvement partners to gather the first-hand evidence required by the local authority. Overall, the quality of support and the information provided by the CSC is too variable.

The local authority places a high priority on supporting its most vulnerable children and young people to improve their outcomes, well-being and life chances and provides helpful support for schools to improve these pupils' attendance and behaviour. Over time, the attendance of pupils in Rhondda Cynon Taf has been lower than national figures and the attendance of those pupils who are eligible for free school meals has remained low.

The local authority has provided particularly helpful support to its schools and settings to prepare for the additional learning needs (ALN) reforms. Staff have benefited from a broad range of professional learning to improve their understanding of how to identify individual needs. A particular strength has been the way in which staff have been supported to develop their understanding of person-centred planning and individual development plans. Overall, support for additional learning needs is strong.

Across the directorate, senior officers and their staff are committed to continuously improving the service they provide. They strive to identify and support future leaders and provide a very helpful leadership development professional learning programme.

A notable strength is the way in which this has supported succession planning and improvements in leadership across the

local authority and its schools. The director and her senior team have developed a clear programme for evaluation and improvement, which supports all officers to have a suitable overview of their areas of responsibility. Despite this, self-evaluation and improvement planning processes often lack precision. In particular, officers do not always identify clear indicators of success, and this hinders their ability to evaluate their work precisely and to plan for future improvements.

Leaders in the directorate support staff very well. A particular strength is the way they provide officers with the autonomy to make decisions about how best to support schools and settings. Staff feel valued and well-informed of the direction and vision for improvement in the local authority. Over time, this has supported the local authority effectively to incrementally improve the services they provide.

- 6.3 The published report provides a comprehensive review of all findings, with multiple references to areas of strength and considerably fewer references to areas for improvement. Nevertheless, there is a clear commitment to ensuring that the Directorate continues on its improvement journey and to ensuring that we continue to further develop the services that we provide for our children and young people, our schools and communities.
- 6.4 Areas identified for improvement had in the main been identified through prior self-evaluation and will continue to form an important part of our improvement plans and a clear focus for critical self-evaluation.
- 6.5 Improvement work to refine and further improve self-evaluation processes has been ongoing but there is a need to further streamline and simplify processes. Moving forward, the Directorate's Delivery Plan will be better informed by enhanced performance measures and success criteria. Given the suspension of a number of national performance indications the Directorate has less local, regional and national data to draw upon so creativity will be required. Greater focus will also be placed on aligning the service plans that sit below the Directorate's Delivery Plan (Recommendation 1).
- 6.6 Delivery planning and partnership approaches to the WESP have improved significantly, with a member of the senior management team in Education leading on each of the seven strategic outcomes. There are some exciting developments underway to extend Welsh medium learning support class provision for learners with ALN and a small team of staff to support Welsh language immersion has now been appointed (Recommendation 2).
- 6.7 Work aimed at improving attendance and reducing exclusions remain a core focus of our work and includes continued enhanced investment through family engagement and STEP 4 provisions (Recommendation 3).

7. **INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE**

7.1 Estyn considered that there was particularly strong practice in two key areas and invited the local authority to prepare a case study for innovative and effective practice. One case study was in relation to our use of data to inform planning and decision making. The second, was on professional learning for leadership. The impact of work in these areas of provision and standards was considered to be very effective.

7.2 A case study on our innovative and effective use of data is now available on the Estyn website. An extract is provided below:

'The availability of live data from 115 schools, across up to 30 services with over 500 users, enables officers to access an extensive range of relevant and up-to date information. The Education Directorate now has live overviews of a broad range of interactive data.

This information and data is central to all strategic planning and delivery across the Education Directorate, including school re-organisation proposals, service self-evaluation, service review and performance management. Reports to Cabinet and Scrutiny meetings are well informed through access to live datasets.

The local authority uses a broad range of information, including demographic trends, birth data and housing developments to consider school capacities and admissions carefully.

Access to relevant data was crucial in supporting the Covid response. Vulnerable learner identification, particularly where there were associated issues, were targeted well for wellbeing provision and visits, and other support. Cross directorate work with colleagues in Children's Services ensured that schools possessed up to date data on vulnerable learners in their schools according to different categories of vulnerability.

With staff now working in an agile manner, access to operational data on a suitable device has become essential. Attendance and Wellbeing staff now have access to attendance data on their smartphones and use this to support and challenge schools in a timely manner.'

7.3 Estyn were also complimentary about our investment in leadership programmes and the professional learning offer that was made available to aspiring leaders within schools and the local authority. An extract from the case study of innovative and effective practice is available on Estyn's website and is provided below:

'Leadership across the directorate is strong and effective. The broad range of training has supported leaders at all levels to develop a range of skills. They lead well by example and have secured effective improvements across the directorate. For example, the school improvement team have strengthened the way in which they challenge and support the regional consortium to improve the support for their schools. The local authority aspiring school leaders programme is well regarded by school leaders and has supported the growth and development of these participants well. All of the staff who engaged in the recent programme have secured leadership posts.'

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

8.1 Estyn identified three key recommendations which are detailed below:

R1: Sharpen approaches to self-evaluation and improvement planning.

R2: Strengthen approaches to Welsh-medium education, for example by improving access and support for learners with additional learning needs and providing opportunities for late immersion for learners.

R3: Work closely with schools, pupil referral units and the regional consortium to build on the local authority's work to further improve attendance and reduce exclusions.

9. NEXT STEPS

9.1 The recommendations made by Estyn will be a strong focus for improvement during 2023 and beyond and will be reflected in our delivery plans and improvement actions for 2023-24.

10. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

10.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not currently required - the content of the report is for information purposes only.

11. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The report highlights specific recommendations relating to the development of Welsh language provision and these will be addressed as part of ongoing improvement planning and delivery.

12. CONSULTATION

12.1 In line with Estyn's expectation the report was pre-scrutinised by the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee on the 20th June and the comments and feedback of which will be provided at the meeting by the Head of Democratic Services.

12.2 The report will also be considered by the Council's Governance and Audit Committee at a future meeting.

13. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

13.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report.

14. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

14.1 The inspection of local government education services (LGES) is carried out under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997 which specified that His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales (HMCI) 'may, and, if requested to do so by the Secretary of State, shall, arrange for any local authority to be inspected'. Such an inspection 'shall consist of a review of the way in which the authority are performing any function which relates to the provision of education for (a) persons of compulsory school age (whether at school or otherwise) or (b) for persons of any age above or below that age who are registered as pupils at schools maintained by the authority.'

14.2 Other aspects of local authority provision are subject to inspection under a range of legislation, including the functions conferred on them under sections 25 and 26 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 relating to education, training or youth support services (within the meaning of section 123 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000).

14.3 HMCI may, under Section 41 of the Education Act 1997, as amended by the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004, request Audit Wales to assist with any inspection under Section 38. Audit Wales contributes to those inspections of local authorities in which their expertise will add to the rigour and effectiveness of the inspection. Audit Wales contribute to the regular collection and analysis of local authority performance data as partners in the inspection of local authorities,

14.4 The inspection of local authority education services for children and young people covers the statutory functions of the local authority, including the local authority youth service. In addition, it includes inspection of the partnership arrangements for youth support services. These partnership arrangements are those led by the local authority to plan, co-ordinate and oversee all youth support services in an area. These partnership arrangements are set out in the Learning and Skills Act 2000, and the Welsh Government policy as described in Extending Entitlement and associated guidance. Under the Children Act 2004, this statutory responsibility for partnership planning can be fulfilled through a young people's partnership, children and young people's partnership or a framework partnership.

14.5 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and Local Government (Wales) Act 2015 support the approach and arrangements for the inspection of local authorities either by individual inspectorates or jointly between Estyn, Audit Wales and Care Inspectorate Wales.

14.6 There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

15. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES

15.1 This is an information report presenting an overview of the recent Estyn inspection of the local authority's education services. There are clear links associated to the Corporate Plan 2020-24 and indeed the Education Strategic Plan for 2022-25 which places a clear emphasis on improving schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf and realising our Mission of Achieving Equity and Excellence in Education and Enhanced Wellbeing for All.

16. STRATEGIC OR RELEVANT TO ELECTORAL WARDS

16.1 This report relates to all electoral wards.

17. CONCLUSION

17.1 It is hoped that Cabinet Members consider themselves to be well informed and have a clear understanding of Estyn's processes and procedures for inspecting a local authority, as well as the strengths and areas for development for the Education Directorate as a result of its most recent inspection by Estyn.

17.2 The Directorate will ensure that the key areas for improvement will be a priority for further development in our annual delivery plans and a strong focus for our ongoing self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.

Other Information:-

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

Education and Inclusion Services Scrutiny

Contact Officer

Gaynor Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972
AS AMENDED BY
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET
17TH JULY 2023

**Item: ESTYN'S REPORT ON EDUCATION SERVICES IN RHONDDA CYNON
TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Background Papers

[Inspection report Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council 2023 \(gov.wales\)](#)

Officer to contact:

Gaynor Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services

Appendix 1:

[Inspection report Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council 2023 \(gov.wales\)](#)