



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



**A report on education services in
Vale of Glamorgan Council**

**Civic Office
Holton Road
Barry
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Date of inspection: February 2024

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh.

This inspection was undertaken as part of pilot inspection arrangements. As a result, this report may be slightly different in format to other published reports for providers in the sector.

About Vale of Glamorgan Council

The Vale of Glamorgan has a total of 23,288 pupils across 53 schools. There are 44 primary schools, two all-age school, six secondary schools, and one special school. Seven of these are Welsh medium providers.

Over a three-year average, 17% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, lower than the Wales average of 23%.

The local authority's last inspection was in May 2013, with monitoring visits in October 2014 and November 2015.

In 2023-2024, the local authority's education budget is £162,165,000. The delegated school budget per pupil in 2023-2024 is £5,405, slightly higher than the Wales 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 the Vale of Glamorgan is noted below:

- 12.9% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 14.3%.
- 4.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action).
- 2.8% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (School Action Plus).
- 1.8% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Statemented).
- 4.6% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have additional learning or special educational needs (Individual Development Plan).
- 2.7% of pupils aged 5 to 15 have English as an additional language.
- 11.9% of pupils aged 5 or over are fluent in Welsh, lower than the Wales average of 14.6%.

We carried out a separate inspection of the youth work provision in the Vale of Glamorgan a few weeks prior to the local government education services' (LGES) inspection. Where relevant, the findings and the evaluations from the youth work inspection has informed the work of the LGES inspection team.

Summary

The vision to create 'strong communities with a bright future' underpins all decisions by leaders and officers in the Vale of Glamorgan Council, to ensure that services are tailored to meet individual communities' needs. The leader, chief executive, cabinet member for education, elected members and staff set high expectations of themselves and for all the services that the local authority provides. Officers carry out their roles diligently and are committed to ensuring that all children and young people in the Vale have access to high quality education and support. Generally, schools value the relationships they have with most officers and are proud members of the Vale community.

Overall, the local authority and the Central South Consortium Joint Education Service (CSC) work well together to consider the performance of their schools. Officers make helpful use of this information about pupils' well-being and outcomes. The local authority has a good understanding of many aspects of its schools' work, for example attendance and provision for additional learning needs (ALN), and knows those that they monitor more closely particularly well. However, they do not have a clear enough oversight of the quality of teaching and the progress pupils are making in their learning in all schools and this reduces their ability to target their resources for school improvement. The local authority have not ensured that CSC consistently provides helpful information about these aspects for all schools.

The local authority provides strong support for its schools in relation to supporting pupils with ALN and officers have worked well to strategically plan and deliver support for schools to prepare for the Additional Learning Needs Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET). In addition, support for schools to improve pupils' attendance is generally effective. The local authority uses a broad range of data and works closely with schools and families, and attendance is improving.

Members, senior leaders and officers are committed to reducing the impact of poverty on children and young people and work in this area has focussed closely on improving well-being, supporting families and addressing food insecurity. Work to improve the learning, progress and attainment of pupils living in low-income households is at an early stage of development. The local authority works effectively with young people and ensures that the number of them that do not remain in education, employment or training is low. This work is a particular strength.

There are well-established systems for evaluation and improvement that help the local authority to have an overview of progress in relation to their overarching strengths and areas for development. Evaluation and improvement planning is not consistently precise enough. This means that success is not always identified clearly enough and this limits the local authority's ability to hold officers to account for securing improvements.

Cross-directorate working is a notable strength of the local authority's work. The shared ambitions and cross directorate planning have secured effective working across all directorates that has supported education services well. This has helped the local authority to prioritise funding for education and work collaboratively, for

example with resources and social services to provide rounded support for school, children and young people and their families.

Recommendations

- R1 Sharpen the focus of evaluation and improvement processes
- R2 Improve the quality and use of information about learning and teaching in schools to enable the local authority to best direct its resources towards areas for improvement

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 the impact of cross-directorate working on education services, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Education services

Under Inspection Area 2, Estyn sets local inspection questions that are relevant to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's current strategic priorities or result from information that Estyn has about education services in the local authority.

How effective are school improvement processes in improving leadership, teaching and learning?

The local authority has been successful in developing a collaborative culture for improvement with its school leaders. School leaders are proud to work in the Vale of Glamorgan. Professional relationships between most officers and headteachers are strong. School leaders appreciate the local authority's support to improve, as well as their encouragement to explore different approaches to working with, and learning from, each other's schools. There is a strong focus on ensuring there are opportunities for school leaders at all levels to access, and contribute to, regional leadership development programmes. New and acting headteachers receive valued support through a tailored suite of induction training and mentoring from more experienced colleagues. Provision for governor support is effective and there are

high levels of engagement. All of this helps to build leadership capacity across the authority's schools.

The authority has a strong understanding of many aspects of its schools' work and performance. Over time, it has provided proportionate support and challenge to help secure improvements to pupils' well-being and outcomes in most schools. Standards at the end of key stage 4 in the three years before the pandemic were generally above national averages, although outcomes for a few secondary schools were variable during this time. During the same period, outcomes for those pupils eligible for free school meals were generally above national averages.

Between September 2017 and March 2020, we inspected eighteen primary schools, one all-age school, two secondary schools and one pupil referral unit. The outcomes of these inspections are generally in line with national findings during the same period.

The local authority has useful mechanisms for drawing together intelligence collated by the regional service for school improvement about each of its schools and rich data that is captured across a wide range of service areas. Senior leaders, officers and improvement partners scrutinise this information in termly 'Well-being and Improvement Board' meetings. This helps to highlight where there is effective practice that might be shared more widely across the authority's schools and supports the identification of emerging issues in individual schools, such as concerns about leadership. While this valuable forum is used to agree what support and intervention is required, actions, responsibilities and timescales are not always recorded. This means that senior leaders do not always have a clear enough picture of whether actions have been carried out or if schools have made the desired improvements.

Since inspections resumed in February 2022, we have inspected fifteen primary schools and three secondary schools. We asked two primary schools and two secondary schools to provide case studies of good practice. One primary school was placed into Estyn review. In addition, one primary and one secondary school were judged to require special measures.

Officers work in close partnership with school leaders, improvement partners and other colleagues in CSC to provide bespoke programmes for those few schools they identify as requiring enhanced support. There are regular progress review meetings for these schools where there is focused discussion and robust challenge about their pace of improvement. The local authority makes appropriate use of its statutory powers, such as issuing warning notices, to prevent important shortcomings in schools from escalating, or to provide additional governance when schools do not address urgent performance issues quickly enough. Systems around schools causing concern in a category of Estyn follow-up are robust and, in most instances, lead to timely improvement.

Overall, the local authority and CSC work together successfully. There are strong relationships between senior leaders across the organisations, where negotiation and compromise characterise their professional discussions. This collaborative approach has led to positive changes to processes, such as the more flexible use of a

'statement of action', that sets out a structured joint plan to address a school's pressing areas for improvement. This has been of benefit to the Vale's schools.

The Principal Improvement Partner (PIP) plays an important role in supporting successful communication between the Vale of Glamorgan and the school improvement service. This has contributed to more efficient and timely sharing of information from both parties. The PIP ensures that improvement partners have secure knowledge and understanding of the authority's strategic priorities to inform their work in schools, such as approaches to supporting the well-being of groups of pupils. An emerging strength is the joint visits to schools between improvement partners and officers. This is helping to provide a more informed and coherent approach to supporting schools to plan for sustainable improvement, particularly in addressing issues such as pupil attendance and exclusions.

Over time, senior leaders have provided appropriate challenge about the effectiveness of improvement partners' work and the quality of their reporting. This has led to important improvements in the quality of evaluation about schools causing concern. Officers have identified the need to improve their monitoring of the impact of professional learning provided to schools to ensure this makes a difference to pupils' learning and progress. Currently, the local authority does not have a secure enough picture of the quality of teaching and the progress pupils are making in their learning in all schools, including that of vulnerable pupils. It has not ensured that the regional service consistently provides relevant school-level information about these important areas. This includes how well pupils acquire literacy, numeracy, digital and Welsh language skills, particularly in English-medium schools. This makes it difficult for the local authority to know how best to direct its resources to build individual schools' capacity for improvement.

How well does the local authority plan strategically to support pupils with ALN?

Local authority senior leaders' strategic approach to implementing ALNET has been effective. They have communicated explicitly the requirements of the Act with all stakeholders. There is a clear vision to secure successful delivery of the requirements of the Act and the local authority is in a strong position to deliver all aspects of the reform.

Leaders have increased the capacity of specialist resource provision, including in Welsh medium settings, to address the needs of pupils based on a wide range of purposeful information. In response to the notable increase in the number of Individual Development Plans (IDP), the local authority introduced the role of ALN IDP officers and this has proved integral to the success of the IDP process and is a strength of the local authority. These officers are highly skilled and knowledgeable and provide valuable support and guidance to schools. Officers have reviewed local authority processes and improved sys

tems successfully. This includes realigning the school referral and panel processes effectively to manage requests from schools for support or additional learning provision (ALP). This has helped the local authority to make decisions in a timely manner with effective quality assurance processes embedded in practice.

Cameo: Cluster based IDP champions

IDP champions are school-based practitioners equipped with a range of skills to provide helpful support to schools.

The local authority has developed this role successfully across all school clusters by providing high quality professional learning.

IDP champions provide advice and guidance and share effective practice to develop and maintain high quality school based IDPs and are integral to the quality assurance processes for school IDPs. This has helped to strengthen schools' understanding of the importance of the statutory documentation and the impact of IDPs to support pupil progress.

Working in collaboration with IDP champions and Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALNCos), officers recognise the need to refine the IDP process to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

Officers are empowering school leaders to secure and drive a whole-school approach to supporting pupils with ALN. For example, the local authority, in partnership with school leaders, identified the need to support the increasing number of pupils with complex social, emotional, and mental health needs. Work began in 2019 and was further supported through the introduction of their 'Whole School Approach to emotional and mental well-being'. Officers work collaboratively with a range of partners to successfully embed this approach as part of whole-school practice. This has helped school leaders to consider how they can secure improvements in their curriculum offer, underpinned by elements of healthy social and emotional skill development.

The local authority has strengthened the engagement service, which provides valuable support to schools. This approach aligns closely with the local authority's vision for ALN, which focuses on building the capacity of mainstream staff to develop an inclusive culture in schools.

The local authority has introduced a beneficial self-evaluation tool for ALN in all schools. This provides school leaders and ALNCos with important information and is beginning to help schools become increasingly reflective and evaluative in their ALN practices.

The local authority provides high quality support and professional learning for school staff and in particular ALNCos. They deliver half-termly cluster-based events during which ALNCos share effective practice, consider the impact of their work and co-construct training and development sessions with officers. For example, ALNCos and officers are developing guidance on universal and additional learning provision well. This is supporting ALNCos to become reflective practitioners.

The Well-being Improvement Board (WIB) provides a useful platform for information sharing across service areas. It is convened and managed by the local authority in partnership with the CSC. A range of service areas is represented to provide a breadth of information to support and challenge activities and actions in schools. This strengthens quality assurance processes of ALN provision well.

Officers generally have a suitable understanding of areas improvement, which are captured in team plans. They are refining the level of challenge they provide to schools to increase the focus on improving teaching and learning for pupils with ALN.

How well does the local authority support schools to improve attendance?

The local authority has a strong focus on improving school attendance. This focus is reflected in the council's corporate vision and is included within the council's annual delivery plan as well as within the specific plans of the learning and skills directorate. This coherence is helping leaders to have a clear understanding of how they should focus their work to improve attendance and they communicate this effectively with schools and other stakeholders across the local authority.

Strong relationships with schools help officers to support and challenge schools well to improve their rates of attendance and this is having a positive impact, particularly in primary schools. The attendance and exclusion data for all groups of pupils is collected regularly and the team visit schools frequently to monitor and identify pupils who require support. Officers work skilfully with schools to adapt support to individual needs.

Between 2017 and 2019, attendance in primary schools was generally in line with the national average. During this time, attendance in secondary schools was a positive feature and nearly all schools were in line with, or above, national averages. Between 2022 and 2023 overall rates of attendance remained above national averages, although secondary school attendance was slightly below the national average. Since September 2023, rates of attendance have improved. Whilst fixed term exclusion rates remain low overall, in a very few schools the number of exclusions is too high.

The local authority and schools track and monitor student attendance closely. They analyse data well to identify need and provide young people and their families with valuable and timely support. The comprehensive tracking of data ensures that the inclusion team has a clear understanding of trends in attendance across all schools, and the impact of their support on school attendance over time. In addition, the local authority works effectively with schools to understand the challenges and barriers to achieving good attendance and is responsive to the needs of schools and communities.

The local authority has worked alongside schools to increase expectations around pupils' attendance. This includes setting challenging targets with schools, and responding quickly to raise these targets as schools achieve them. The effective sharing of attendance data between schools increases the challenge to further improve their attendance considering similar contexts. In addition, training for governors has helped raise the level of challenge they provide to school leaders.

Support for schools in improving attendance encompasses a wealth of universal, targeted and bespoke strategies. These valuable strategies are carefully tailored to each school's specific context and challenges. Schools benefit from the deployment of family engagers, the provision of targeted professional learning, workshop sessions for parents, and out-of-school tuition to help re-engage pupils in learning. Likewise, the 'Miss School Miss Out' campaign, which was developed with pupils and

widely promoted, engages pupils and their families to understand what they will gain by attending school.

The high-quality toolkit recently developed in collaboration with schools to support them to increase rates of attendance is valued by stakeholders and is starting to have a positive impact. In addition, the structured gradation of support levels for enhancing attendance is clear, and stakeholders appreciate the efficacy of the triage system for referring pupils and families to additional support. When referrals do not meet the required threshold, schools appreciate that they continue to receive valuable advice and support in the short term. The local authority has clear processes for monitoring the use of pastoral support plans in schools. These processes are robust and ensure that pupils do not remain on these plans for prolonged periods of time.

The local authority collaborates effectively with partners both nationally and internationally, exchanging best practices and investigating strategies that impact positively on improving attendance. Schools in the local authority benefit from learning about effective practice to help improve their attendance rates. The local authority also maintains strong partnerships with external organisations and works closely with their youth service to provide support for pupils aimed at improving their attendance. Efforts to re-engage pupils with their schooling through, for example, additional classes and experiences outside of educational settings are having a positive impact.

How effective is the authority in reducing the impact of poverty on outcomes for children and young people?

The local authority has a strong moral commitment to mitigate the effects of poverty on the well-being of children and young people and recognises that this is an important step in improving educational outcomes. Central to this commitment is the shared understanding by officers of the purpose of their work and that employment is the best route out of poverty.

Services are well targeted to support children, young people and families to improve their health and well-being and help them to progress into further learning or employment. The local authority makes effective use of a wide range of data and intelligence and has a secure understanding of the needs of its diverse communities. Officers are responsive to the challenges brought about by poverty. This includes working closely with the Llantwit Major cluster to respond to challenges resulting from the demographic changes in the schools' communities.

Collaboration and partnership working is a strong feature of the local authority's work. The response to addressing the impact of poverty is multi-faceted, drawing on the expertise of a range of services from within the learning and skills directorate and working closely with external agencies. This enables the authority to be agile in directing services to where the need is greatest and immediate. For example, youth workers have recently been deployed to work with young people in a community experiencing an increase in anti-social behaviour.

The authority has developed and supported a range of valuable approaches to tackle food insecurity. These include the Llantwit Major Food Project, the Cadfield Van and the Big Fresh Catering Company.

The local authority works closely with schools, other public services, and the voluntary sector to develop community focused initiatives aimed at improving well-being and addressing the cost-of-living crisis. These include warm spaces, gardens to encourage the community to grow their own food and approaches to tackle social isolation.

The local authority has prioritised its work in the Pencoedtre Learning Community (PLC). This consists of a secondary school and five primary schools located in the area of the authority with the highest levels of poverty. It has a vision to create an inclusive, safe, and enabling community where relationships flourish. The community focused school manager, family engagers and local authority senior leaders work together in the primary schools to make this vision a reality for the local communities. This is helping to engage families and improve attendance in partner primary schools. Work in the secondary school is in the very early stages of development.

Services, such as Families First, are co-located in the PLC, helping families to access support and advice to make positive changes to their lives. In addition, the PLC has employed an educational psychologist to provide timely and helpful support. All primary schools in the PLC have well-established facilities to help develop community relationships and support their families. For example, each school runs a 'pay as you feel' shop and café for local people. The co-location of Flying Start¹ staff in schools increases the accessibility and responsiveness of services for families. In addition, Flying Start, family engagers and the community focused school manager work closely to ensure that pre-school programmes support the youngest children to progress to primary schools.

The early identification, monitoring and provision to support young people at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) is a strength. Officers and an extensive range of partners work relentlessly with schools to develop tailored strategies for pupils to ensure that they remain in education or employment after leaving school. There is a highly effective triage system to identify and provide support at the appropriate level for individuals. The authority's tenacious approach to tackling disengagement from education, employment or training has had a positive impact on reducing the number of NEETs.

¹ Flying Start helps families with children under 4 years old in disadvantaged areas of Wales. The help available includes part time childcare for 2 to 3 year olds; an enhanced Health Visiting service; access to parenting programmes; and support for children to learn to talk and communicate.

Cameo: A collaborative approach to supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET and homeless

The local authority has recently introduced the 'Strive' project, which works with young people aged 11-16 identified at risk of becoming NEET or homeless. Project staff work on a one-to-one basis with a caseload of learners, using a personalised plan to develop strategies for each learner. The plan is designed to support learners with their attendance and behaviour, provide well-being packages, period dignity resources and basic hygiene products, and connect with wider projects linked to family ties, mediation, and family conversations.

Overall, the impact of the work of the authority to reduce the impact of poverty on the well-being of children and young people is strong. However, the specific focus on improving the learning, progress and attainment of pupils living in low-income households is in the early stages of development.

Leadership and management

Leaders have established a clear vision to create 'strong communities with a bright future', which is well understood by officers. This shared ambition, with an emphasis on cross-directorate working and integrated planning, has created a strong culture of collaboration and sense of purpose. This is a strength of the local authority and ensures that well-being is a high priority for all. Senior leaders prioritise education and the local authority values the work of its schools highly. Although there is a strong focus on supporting the well being of learners in the corporate plans and processes of the local authority, the priorities for learners' standards and progress are less clear.

The local authority's core values permeate and underpin its decision-making, policies and procedures. Equity is a high priority, and leaders' and elected members' work is driven by a strong moral purpose. All strategic documents and plans take good account of national priorities. The local authority's Strategic Equality Plan is robust and integrated across its work. The objectives of the Well-being of Future Generations Act are woven purposefully through the corporate plan.

Cameo: Promoting anti-racism in the Vale

Leaders and officers in the Vale are committed to creating an anti-racist culture across their local authority. The authority has provided a range of professional learning for its staff and schools about how to promote an anti-racist approach. This includes sharing relevant research and highlighting the most effective practices in becoming anti-racist.

Officers have established an anti-racist action research project to help school leaders and staff consider how best to promote this culture and to ensure that their curriculum is inclusive and anti-racist. Schools involved in the project have established helpful approaches to planning for a curriculum that promotes and celebrates diversity as well as educating the school community about how to be anti-racist.

Leaders promote and model professional behaviours well. The Director of Learning and Skills provides calm and assured leadership to her teams. There are positive working relationships across the directorate and a supportive environment that allows for professional challenge. Across the authority, there are high expectations of leaders at all levels, and clear and well-shared processes for managing the work of each service area. The local authority has recently refined arrangements for performance management so that they are closely aligned to its core values. This fosters positive professional behaviours and attitudes and ensures that all staff consider how their work supports the authority's vision. Communication between leaders, officers and stakeholders is effective, and this further facilitates the sharing of key goals. Headteachers appreciate the trusting and transparent relationships they have with most officers.

The local authority works well with other public service bodies to explore local contextual issues, develop links between different service areas and identify any potential barriers to improvement. This work is supporting the well-being objectives in the corporate plan effectively.

Elected members scrutinise the work of the learning and skills directorate suitably. Leaders and officers ensure that the scrutiny committee has sufficient information to allow its members to challenge appropriately. There are a range of opportunities for elected members to develop their understanding of the work of education providers and the needs of young people. These include visits to schools and inviting headteachers to scrutiny committee. Members of the Youth Council also contribute to scrutiny, and elected members take good account of their views. Leaders are not afraid to tackle issues pro-actively for the benefit of children and young people in the Vale, for example the development of a 'Transgender Toolkit' to support education providers, or through discussing schools' approaches to teaching religion values and ethics.

Leaders prioritise continuous improvement and there is strong emphasis on self-reflection, which informs the work of leaders and officers at all levels. The local authority has developed its approaches to self-evaluation and planning for improvement over time to make these systematic and comprehensive, and to ensure that this work is in line with the authority's ambitions. As a result, the vision and values of the local authority run through the work of all services and there is a consistent, corporate approach across teams. There are helpful quality assurance processes across directorates that provide suitable challenge, valuable moderation and an effective sharing of approaches.

There are suitable processes to gather information against key priorities, including valuable opportunities to collate information from across service areas, such as the Well-being Improvement Matrix, which enables officers to support schools in a more holistic way. Teams work well to address emerging issues and address them in a timely way. However, there is variation in the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning across the directorate. A few aspects of improvement work are not recorded sufficiently well and are not always captured in the formal improvement planning. This means that officers do not always consider the impact of this work well enough.

Although self-evaluation and improvement processes ensure that leaders and officers consider the overarching goals of the authority, some important issues are not identified precisely enough, particularly in relation to teaching and learning. Success is not identified specifically enough, which means that it is difficult to measure progress and to hold leaders to account securely.

The local authority fosters an environment where professional learning is highly valued. There are many opportunities for staff to develop their professional skills, knowledge and understanding purposefully. These include support for staff to achieve professional qualifications, undertake research enquiries and work together on projects to support the work of their service teams. The learning café provides valuable opportunities for structured professional learning and informal, peer-to-peer professional dialogue. This encourages innovation, helps staff to make creative connections between areas of their work and supports staff well-being.

Cameo: The Learning Café

As part of its strategy to provide ongoing and tailored professional learning for all staff, the local authority has established 'The Learning Café'. This provides a broad range of opportunities for staff at all levels to engage in purposeful professional learning. This includes through targeted emails, opportunities to engage in discussions about professional learning and research and a range of face-to-face support to improve practice. The Learning Café has helped a broad range of officers to collaborate on different aspects of their work, enabled the sharing of effective practice and promoted a culture where officers take responsibility for driving their own learning.

The local authority is beginning to roll out its Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). The recent appointment of a WESP lead officer has increased the local authority's capacity to deliver on these outcomes. It has identified suitable actions to improve provision for Welsh-medium education and is gradually increasing the availability of placements at Welsh-medium nursery education settings. The authority has increased Welsh-medium provision for pupils and introduced a Welsh language centre for education that has improved provision for primary aged children. The local authority's progress around addressing challenges in improving Welsh provision across its schools is at an early stage.

The safeguarding of children and young people is a high priority. There is strong and beneficial partnership working between different directorates to support this work. Work to ensuring safer recruitment in schools and for centrally employed staff and elected members is robust.

The local authority's education safeguarding team provides schools and other provisions with high quality support. Officers challenge schools appropriately over their annual safeguarding audits and provide bespoke support and training, when required, to strengthen practice. Overall, data tracking systems are robust and provide officers with an up-to-date overview of, for example, safeguarding training in schools at all levels and instances of bullying.

The local authority organises regular opportunities for schools' designated safeguarding persons (DSPs) to meet to discuss safeguarding concerns and to receive training on important matters. Schools find these meetings very beneficial.

A strength of the authority's work is the way officers engage with young people to ensure that their voice is heard. For example, a group of young people contributed to the guidance on tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment. This helps schools to strengthen their safeguarding practices.

The authority's total schools budgeted expenditure per pupil, which since 2011-2012 has been either the lowest or second lowest in Wales, increased by 15.1% in 2023-2024, taking the authority's expenditure to the fifth lowest. However, when setting its annual budgets in recent years, the authority has ensured prioritisation of funding for education and delegated the second highest level of funding to schools across Wales in 2023-2024. The authority's capital funding programme contains planned funding to implement key priorities within education, including its strategic communities for learning programme and to undertake major building works in schools. In the past year, the authority has also redirected corporate underspends to help address in year funding pressures across education.

Within the context of the overall pressures on the authority's finances, education services and schools face ongoing financial challenges. The authority is further developing its use of comparative cost information to improve how it uses its financial resources to achieve its outcomes. Elected members receive detailed quarterly budget monitoring reports, which clearly identify in year pressures across education and the overall position of school budgets. Senior leaders have a detailed understanding of the causes and effects of the main budget pressures across central education services, including additional learning needs and school transport as well as schools. As a result, the recently refreshed whole-authority transformation strategy will include a focus on education and schools with a view to ensuring longer term sustainability.

In recent years, the authority has developed innovative approaches to some aspects of its education service delivery, including the development of a local authority trading company for school catering (Big Fresh) whose surplus is used to support schools in addressing the impact of poverty.

Cameo: Big Fresh Catering Company

The Big Fresh Catering Company is an innovative business model that has been set up as a Local Authority Trading Company. Significant work has been undertaken by Big Fresh to promote healthy eating and help tackle food insecurity. Big Fresh reinvests any surplus money it generates back into schools or makes funding available to support curriculum and well-being-based projects such as the creation of after school clubs or well-being areas.

Schools benefit from the support that central education teams provide, for example from the school finance and human resources teams, which reflects the collaborative approach the authority adopts when working with its schools. There is a wide range of relevant Service Level Agreements, which have a good level of take up by schools, and the authority reviews those in conjunction with schools.

The school budget forum membership reflects all school types and clusters across the authority. Forum meetings focus on important areas relating to the financing of schools and the forum regularly reviews aspects of its funding formula to ensure that it meets the needs of schools. School leaders and governors value the transparent communication from the authority and feel listened to. This two-way dialogue has ensured that both the local authority and schools have a well-developed understanding of the financial constraints and challenges that each face. The benefits of this communication extend beyond the forum as members feel confident in sharing information with colleagues across their clusters.

Overall, school balances totalled £893k at the end of 2019-2020 and subsequently rose rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic to £12.71 million by the end of 2021-2022, which was similar to the pattern across Wales. At the end of 2021-2022, no schools within the authority were in deficit. However, the authority's projections show that, by the end of 2023-2024, 19 schools will be in a deficit position. Under its Fair Funding for Schools scheme, the authority requires schools in deficit to develop recovery plans to return to a positive budget position within five years. However, despite the authority's support and challenge to schools during the development of those plans, including the use of data and peer review, it has evaluated that almost all of the schools currently in deficit will be unable to return to a balanced position at this time. This poses a notable on-going risk to the sustainability of individual schools' budgets.

Appendix 1: CASE STUDY OF INNOVATIVE OR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Local Authority: Vale of Glamorgan Council

Contact person, email address & telephone number for further information:

Trevor Baker, Head of Strategy, Community Learning & Resources.

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Number and age range of learners:

n/a

Website: <https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/en/index.aspx>

Date of Estyn inspection: March 2024

Area of practice which has been identified during inspection:

Cross-directorate working across the LA.

Title of case study: The Impact of cross directorate working on education services in the Vale of Glamorgan.

Inspection area:

IA2

Context and background to the effective or innovative practice

Embedding a strong ethos for cross-directorate working has underpinned the Local Authority's work in driving improvement across education services and securing positive outcomes for its learners.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, provided a helpful platform for the local authority to put a strong focus on the need to ensure that all directorates in the local authority work effectively together to achieve its wellbeing objectives and contribute to the seven national wellbeing goals. As a result, leaders worked well to develop a collaborative approach to deliver its improvement priorities across directorates rather than through service silos.

To facilitate successful cross-directorate working the local authority focused on:

- Raising the profile of education services and priorities across the local authority to prioritise effective use of resources.
- Ensuring staff work collaboratively to support the local authorities' communities.

- Strengthening its corporate vision and the articulation of education improvement priorities through all aspects of work.
- Placing wellbeing front and centre of what it does, with focus on vulnerable groups.
- Developing its professional learning offering to develop skill sets of staff, so they are equipped to tackle challenges both now and in the future.
- Enhancing 'critical friend' challenge across all directorates to promote shared learning and drive discussions around improvement.

Description of nature of strategy or activity

Cross directorate working became a key strength of the LA in driving improvement across education services by:

- Developing an integrated improvement planning system that enabled the LA to develop shared improvement priorities that reflect the needs and priorities of its communities and citizens and develop a culture of collaboration across the LA's directorates.
- Articulating a shared vision for the LA of 'Strong Communities with a Bright Future' binds together its collective efforts to achieve a common goal. This vision runs through to the LA's shared objectives and improvement priorities that are reflected in a single Annual Delivery Plan (ADP) where the emphasis is on cross-directorate working. The ADP is co-constructed annually by senior leaders (across the LA), Elected Members, and with extensive engagement from staff, citizens, partners and schools.
- Embedding opportunities for collective challenge as part of the LA's annual self-assessment process. Peer directors and elected members (Cabinet and Scrutiny) attend peer challenge sessions to act as a 'critical friend' to challenge each directorate's self-assessment findings and judgements to ensure honesty, fairness and consistency.
- Developing effective mechanisms for allocating resources linked to ADP priorities through the annual budget setting process with the collective involvement of elected members, officers from across the Council and headteachers. Consequently, there has been a strong focus on education as a key priority, which is evident as 39% of the Council's budget is allocated to schools (~£115m).
- Fostering joint working across the LA through regular and effective Senior Leadership Team meetings and Insight Board Chief Officer Briefings. These provide mechanisms through which officers from across the directorates come together to make collective decisions, can develop new perspectives and it provides opportunities to leverage support across the LA for problem solving and developing services leading to positive benefits for our learners, staff and communities.

- Embedding a 'strong learning community' with a culture of collaboration in learning has been driven by the LA's [Culture Book](#). The LA has made effective use of its iDev learning platform and Learning Café (internal professional development network) to promote and engage learning and development. The Learning Café has been a key mechanism for staff engagement and enhancing professional development for colleagues to learn from each other, shared good practice, and expressing ideas for addressing key challenges facing the LA.
- Prioritising wellbeing as an area of core focus to enable effective joint working in our communities. The Learning & Skills directorate has led the way on developing a Whole School Approach (WSA) to wellbeing so that this is embedded across the LA's schools and centralised services.
- Creating purposeful participation and collaboration opportunities across directorates, with lead officers both internal and external to education services, to draw on the skills, expertise and perspectives across the Council to support delivery of key initiatives such as the Community Focused Schools, SHEP/Food and Fun programme, poverty/cost of living initiatives such as Pay as you Feel Pantries/[Big Bocs Bwyd](#), [Strive/NEET prevention](#), development of the [Transgender Inclusion Toolkit](#) and delivery of [Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme](#).
- Focusing on the development of community focused schools and using a cluster-based approach to collaboration with colleagues from health, Social Services, Corporate Services, Neighbourhood Services to reduce the impact of poverty on children and young people as evidenced by work undertaken in the Pencoedtre Learning Community (PLC).
- The LA's overarching transformation programme brought together the skills/expertise of officers from across directorates to reshape service delivery models, The Big Fresh Catering Company is an innovative and sustainable catering model that emerged from this transformation programme with input and contribution from across the council, and was the key enabler in the accelerated roll out of the Universal Free School Meal provision across all primary schools in the Vale, it has also utilised its surpluses to reinvest back into schools that has had noticeable impact.
- Maximised use of grant funding to support disadvantaged learners. For example, delegation of grants to support the work of Community Focus School Managers and Family Engagement Officers in the Pencoedtre Learning Community, the dissemination of Big Fresh Catering Company profit share to schools and collaboration with the Healthy Living Team to deliver targeted sport/physical activities in the LA's most deprived and least active communities.

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

- Adopting a holistic Annual Delivery Plan has ensured shared responsibility for the LA's education priorities and promoted a culture of collaboration to tackle the

LA's critical challenges. This means that senior leaders from all directorates understand the importance of prioritising education.

- Annual peer challenge mechanism has positively impacted on cross-directorate relationships and opportunities to forge further collaborative working for effective integration of services. This has also helped improve the quality of improvement planning and developed a shared ownership of actions to improve the lives of young people in The Vale.
- The LA's collaborative approach to professional learning has improved individual skill sets, driven innovation and fostered a culture of continuous improvement.
- Excellent engagement from schools in the Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing show that nearly all are engaged in improvement planning to inform school development plans.
- There are clear and shared priorities for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners with corresponding funding allocated for education improvement priorities. This has been evident through investment in several new ALN provisions to meet growth in demand.
- The Big Fresh Catering Company saves the council an annual budget in circa of £400k pa and it has delivered a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of learners. All generated surpluses are reinvested in schools, which most recently has yielded an additional £200k, helping to reduce budget deficits across schools and/or helped to purchase school equipment.
- Targeted work in the Pencoedtre Learning community using Family Engagement Officers has had a positive impact on attendance in primary schools in the cluster (Cadoxton, Colcot, Holton, Jenner and Oakfield),
- The focus on family engagement to support literacy skills development, has impacted positively on teaching and learning across these schools and contributed to improving the quality of primary pupils' writing.
- The impact of collaborative efforts through the Welsh Education Strategic Plan and more widely, the Council's Welsh Language Promotion Strategy, has contributed positively to the retention of Year 1 learners in Welsh medium education and high levels of transition between year groups in Welsh medium schools. For in 2023/24, 95% of learners transitioned from Welsh medium primary to Welsh medium secondary at the end of Year 6.
- Targeted work by the Healthy Living team in 2023/24 in the LA's most deprived and least active communities delivered 134 no cost sport/physical activity sessions impacted on 699 children. Eighty seven percent of participants felt more motivated and confident to take part in activities and 60% indicated that they wanted to join local clubs and continue their activities.
- The LA's NEET figures continue to be comparatively low compared to other LAs in Wales. During 2022/23 (2022 leaver's cohort), 2.46% of Year 13, 0.24% (Year 12) and 1.49% of Year 11 learners became NEET both of which performed

better than the All-Wales figures. This ranked the LA 9th in Wales (Year 13), 4th in Wales (Year12) and 5th (Year 11) respectively.

How have you shared your good practice?

The LA has made effective use of a range of mechanisms and networks to share its good practice across its teams, directorates and more widely with other LAs and external partners. It has done this through:

- sharing directorate messages on regular basis across the Council through a Chief Executive weekly round ups providing a spotlight on notable practice happening across both Education services and other directorates. These key messages are also shared frequently at head teacher meetings.
- successfully utilising the Insight Board, Chief Officer Briefings, Learning & Skills Directorate days, Learning Café to support shared learning and good practice between directorates to foster innovation and continuous improvement;
- developing and sharing case studies to highlight areas where effective and innovative practice is in place; and sharing expertise and knowledge and local, regional and national events/networks.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consulted the local authority on the local inspection questions to be used during the inspection, based on the authority's self-evaluation, strategic plans and relevant data held by Estyn
- analysed the outcomes from open questionnaires, including the views of learners, parents, school staff and governors, local authority staff, regional consortium staff, elected members and general public
- carried out a preliminary visit to the local authority to meet with a range of relevant partners to education services, such as learner representatives, headteachers and governors, and leaders from statutory and third sector agencies working with children and young people

During the inspection, inspectors:

- met with the leader of the council, elected members responsible for education services, elected members responsible for the scrutiny of education services, the chief executive, the director of education, other leaders and managers in education services, other relevant staff in the local authority, the managing director of the regional consortium for school improvement and other relevant staff from the regional consortium
- looked closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- considered the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinised a variety of documents, including information on learner outcomes, information on the performance of schools and other education settings, including information from the regional consortium for school improvement, minutes from a range of meetings, reports presented to council or scrutiny, information relating to the safeguarding of learners and other information relevant to the local authority's education services held by Estyn

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- reviewed the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, standardise and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provided a draft copy of the report for the local authority to note any concerns with factual accuracy, and made amendments where necessary

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

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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This document has been translated by Trosol (English to Welsh).

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Publication date: 30/04/2024