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31 December 2015

Dear Mr Thomas,

Estyn monitoring visit, 16-20 November 2015

Following the outcome of the inspection of education services for children and young people in May 2013, the authority was identified as requiring Estyn monitoring.

The first monitoring visit took place from 13-15 October 2014 and a final monitoring visit took place from 16-20 November 2015. This letter reports the final outcome of Estyn's post-inspection monitoring.

Tony Bate HMI led a team of four inspectors to review the progress made against the six recommendations arising from the inspection.

The team held discussions with elected members, senior officers, and staff from the regional school improvement service, Central South Consortium (CSC), as well as a sample of headteachers and governors. The team scrutinised documentation and evidence on the progress made against all of the recommendations since the inspection.

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to the Leader, the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools, the Managing Director and senior officers including the Director of Learning and Skills.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Vale of Glamorgan Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of May 2013. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority no longer requires Estyn monitoring.

Recommendation 1: Raise standards in schools, particularly in key stage 2 and key stage 3

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals within the authority is 13.5% compared to the Wales average of 18.8%. This level of eligibility ranks the authority 5th in Wales out of the 22 local authorities in 2015, where the 1st is the authority with the lowest level of free school meals. This provides important context for evaluating the outcomes for learners.

Performance of schools within the authority at the Foundation Phase has remained relatively strong. Over the last three years, the percentage of pupils achieving the expected outcome 5 has gradually improved, and at a similar rate of improvement to that of the Wales average. Performance at the higher-than-expected level (outcome 6) has improved over the last three years in all of the learning areas.

At the time of the inspection in key stage 2, the performance of schools was below average when compared to the performance of similar schools on the Welsh Government's free-school-meal benchmarks; too few schools were in either the top 25% or higher 50%. In 2015, there is a marked improvement, with the majority of schools now in the higher 50%. The percentage of pupils achieving the expected level 4 in schools in the authority has improved at a stronger rate than the Wales average. Performance at the higher-than-expected level (level 5) is consistently strong.

Overall, performance at key stage 3 shows consistent improvement over the last three years. The percentage of pupils achieving the key stage 3 core subject indicator has improved at a faster rate than the Wales average. In 2012, three-quarters of secondary schools had performance significantly below average in key stage 3. In 2015, the performance of the majority of secondary schools is now above average when compared to similar schools, with half of the secondary schools in the top 25%.

Since the inspection, there have been improvements in most of the key stage 4 indicators. For example, the percentage of pupils achieving the key stage 4 core subject indicator has improved consistently, and is the highest in Wales in 2015. The percentage of pupils in the authority achieving the Level 2 threshold including mathematics and English or Welsh first language has improved at a faster rate than the Wales average since the last inspection and was the second highest in Wales in 2015. However, despite these overall improvements, the performance of three of the eight secondary schools is below average in 2015 when compared to similar schools.

For the last three years, the Vale of Glamorgan has met or exceeded almost all of the Welsh Government's key stage 3 and 4 benchmarks for performance based on free-school-meal entitlement.

In all the main performance indicators across all phases, the performance of pupils entitled to free school meals has improved since 2012, albeit not always at the same rate as their peers. Since 2012, in the Foundation Phase and at key stage 3, the performance of pupils entitled to free school meals in the authority has improved at a

greater rate than that of their peers. This has narrowed the difference in performance between pupils entitled to free school meals when compared with their peers. However, over the same period in key stage 2 and key stage 4 the improvement trend for this group of pupils is less consistent than for their peers.

The performance gap between boys and girls has varied since 2012. In key stage 3 and 4, boys' performance has improved at a much faster rate than girls. However, in the Foundation Phase and at key stage 2, the performance of girls has improved at a faster rate than boys.

Recommendation 2: Improve the rigour and the level of challenge provided to schools about their performance and quality of leadership

The authority has made very good progress in addressing this recommendation.

At the time of the inspection, we found that officers did not evaluate provision and leadership in schools well enough and relied too heavily on performance data to categorise schools. We also found that there was too much variation in the quality of their work and the quality assurance process was not robust enough to ensure that they challenged schools consistently.

Since the inspection, the authority has worked well with headteachers, governors and CSC to secure improvements. This has led to targeted and worthwhile improvements in leadership, provision, and standards in many of the schools in the authority.

Challenge advisers take appropriate steps to evaluate provision and leadership more effectively, using CSC's revised Framework for Challenge and Support. The recent provisional categorisation of schools in the authority uses a good range of evidence to establish a stronger link between the quality of leadership and standards.

The authority provides useful information to CSC on aspects of leadership, such as issues relating to financial management, human resources, legal issues and governance. Challenge advisers consider this information in evaluating leadership where relevant. The authority has responded appropriately to shortcomings in leadership in several schools since the inspection. Individual School Progress Meetings take place between a panel of members of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee and school representatives of schools causing concern. These meetings provide opportunities for schools to demonstrate their capacity to improve. The meetings also enable the panel to gauge its level of confidence in a school's ability to secure the necessary improvement within the required timescales.

CSC monitors closely the consistency of judgements made by challenge advisers and assures the quality of reports about schools. Senior officers from the authority use fortnightly meetings with senior managers from the regional service to quality assure the work of challenge advisers appropriately.

At the time of the inspection, we found that governors did not receive enough training to support them in discharging their role to evaluate and challenge the quality of provision and leadership in their schools. Through specific training from the authority

and through the work of challenge advisers, governors now have a better understanding of provision and leadership and are more confident in their ability to challenge their school leaders. The authority has strengthened its process for appointing governors to schools so that new governors bring in skills that improve the capacity of the governing body.

Within the last year, the authority has introduced an induction programme for new headteachers. These headteachers are suitably supported by experienced mentors, with opportunities to seek advice, to raise concerns and to address issues more effectively. There are now leadership and professional development programmes for existing headteachers, such as the strategic headship programme and the consultant leadership programme, provided through the consortium. In addition, there are a range of programmes for middle-leaders and future aspiring leaders. However, it is too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes on the overall quality of leadership within schools in the authority.

Recommendation 3: Use the full powers available to the authority to improve schools that are underperforming

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

The local authority has used its powers well overall to improve schools that are underperforming.

The authority appropriately sends informal action letters to most schools causing concern prior to taking formal action. These letters are issued based on a range of criteria, including national categorisation of the school and its performance over time. The process suitably includes elected members and the CSC. If the school does not demonstrate improvement, formal warning notices are issued.

Since the last inspection, the local authority has sent formal warning notices to five secondary schools. These warning notices have outlined concerns about outcomes over two to three years. In most cases, the concerns were highlighted during the authority's own evaluation of performance and in one case, it followed shortcomings highlighted by Estyn. Additional support was provided to these schools, and in four of the five schools, formal notices followed informal letters from the Director. The authority had allowed sufficient time for schools to demonstrate improvements prior to issuing a formal warning notice. Two schools subsequently made sufficient progress to have their formal warnings removed. One school failed to meet its targets and the authority appointed two additional governors to provide additional leadership capacity to the school. The local authority has also used its formal intervention powers to require this school to collaborate with a pathfinder school in another local authority. The remaining two schools have only recently received their formal warning notice.

The authority has also used its formal intervention powers in one primary school to appoint two additional governors. It failed to identify issues in standards at the school prior to an Estyn inspection. Estyn placed the school in the category of requiring significant improvement. The authority has since acted promptly and

decisively, working well with CSC such that Estyn subsequently removed the school from this category. However, the authority has been too slow in addressing continued underperformance in another primary school.

Members of the Scrutiny Committee, supported by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools, monitor progress at these schools rigorously through school progress panel meetings. The panels determine whether schools have in place arrangements to monitor the impact of their improvement plans, to amend them as appropriate and to establish what further progress was required. Members have a clearer view of the strengths and weaknesses of these schools and, as a result, they are playing a stronger role in challenging underperformance.

The authority has also appropriately written informally to a few other schools where they have identified a drop in performance or other issues relating to provision or leadership to record their concern and outline expectations for improvement.

Recommendation 4: Make sure that planning for improvement is thorough and consistent throughout all services

The authority has made very good progress in addressing this recommendation.

Planning for improvement at both service and team level within the Learning and Skills Directorate is carried out systematically, coherently and consistently.

The Council gives high priority to education. It sets out well-defined priorities for improving education outcomes so that '*learners achieve their full potential in order to maximise their life opportunities*'. These priorities and corresponding corporate objectives are addressed well in directorate planning and actions.

An appropriate range of stakeholders contribute to the development of the service and team plans. Through approaches such as team review workshops, officers have greater ownership of the directorate's objectives and understand better the contribution individual officers and teams make to achieve these goals.

The directorate plan sets out clearly its ambition that '*education outcomes in the Vale of Glamorgan are the best in Wales and match those of the most successful authorities in England with similar socio-economic profiles*'. Planning processes are underpinned effectively through an overarching four-year plan that is updated annually. The plan includes a detailed review of the previous year's outcomes with a helpful evaluation of the extent to which directorate actions contributed to achieving corporate priorities. This helps determine future improvement priorities.

An extensive range of key performance indicators and targets supports the directorate's approach effectively. There is a secure understanding of the priorities and associated challenges, including those related to the need for greater efficiencies in service delivery. Actions and initiatives are explicitly cross-referenced to corporate and other strategic plans. A suitable risk register identifies a range of risks related to each service objective and sets out specific strategies to manage these risks.

The reduction from six to just two team plans has helped to ensure greater consistency in planning and delivery, and is contributing well to a more integrated approach to address service priorities. Team plans follow a common format and style and are structured well around key themes. There is explicit alignment between team plans and directorate objectives and actions, as well as with corporate priorities. The school improvement and inclusion service team plan sets out clearly how the work of CSC contributes to the delivery of service priorities. All plans now relate to the financial, rather than the academic year, which helps to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately to the identified priorities.

There is a clear link between planning and performance management arrangements. Officers at all levels are held to account appropriately for implementing those actions for which they have specific responsibility. This takes place, for example, through the council's scrutiny function, at monthly meetings between lead officers and their line managers and through annual performance management reviews.

There is a reflective culture within the Directorate. This is evident through well-designed processes for monitoring progress with implementing actions and assessing particular initiatives, for example through regular team meetings, ongoing reviews, impact evaluations and through formal reporting mechanisms. These processes give particular emphasis to determining improvement priorities, more effective approaches and suitable funding streams. Senior officers continue to consider how they can develop more precise mechanisms to evaluate the impact of specific actions and to achieve a better alignment of plans and timescales with corporate performance management reviews.

Recommendation 5: Ensure that robust systems are in place for evaluating the outcomes of initiatives and that they demonstrate good value-for-money

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

Since the 2013 inspection, the learning and Skills Directorate has improved how it evaluates the outcomes of its capital projects, its education services, and learner support initiatives.

The Directorate is able to demonstrate a clear link between its strategic objectives and budget priorities. For example, through the Directorate's strategic budget setting taking account of reduced revenue, and through the project management approaches for large-scale education capital projects.

The Directorate has developed a common template for annual evaluation reports for key initiatives and services. These annual reports generally evaluate the outcome data well, including an assessment of the resources required for the delivery of each area of work. Managers use this information to assess the impact of their work appropriately, and whether resources are used effectively. This information is also used to make informed judgments about which initiatives should be supported, or continued, and which might need to be changed, reduced, or decommissioned.

The Directorate's focus on demonstrating the impact of its work on learners has helped it shape the service provided by CSC. Consequently, the authority is directly

involved in the quality assurance of the work of challenge advisers, and their work programming and performance objectives. This has helped the authority to ensure the work of CSC provides support and interventions which align better with the authority's needs.

Most schools choose to purchase a range of corporate support services. The standards board, which is made up of officers and representatives from schools, has evaluated the quality of these services as being generally good. Service level agreements are updated annually, and the authority has a clear understanding of the cost of providing these services to schools.

There is an effective and on-going managed reduction of large school balances, which are now below the Welsh average.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the wellbeing of children and young people

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

Following the inspection, the authority has responded well to this recommendation.

The authority's wellbeing in education strategy is now well embedded and has been revised to provide updated direction for the next three years, 2015-2018. The monitoring and evaluation group drives the implementation of this strategy effectively.

The authority captures effectively data and intelligence about the wellbeing of young people from a number of sources. This includes school data, pupils' responses to wellbeing surveys, outcomes of consultations with young people, and evidence from school-based counselling services, the youth offending service and other youth support services. The Directorate uses this information well to inform service planning, including the work of challenge advisers and school improvement officers. The authority has developed very useful data packs for schools, which include relevant intelligence, such as wellbeing data and school performance data. The packs contain an analysis of the data as well as an indication of the important 'issues to explore'. These packs successfully inform the work of schools, inclusion officers, and challenge advisers.

The authority monitors attendance effectively, and has used its information and analysis well to develop strategies with individual schools, inclusion officers and challenge advisers to address poor attendance. The authority has used the regional 'Callio' initiative well, to provide a structured method of identifying and managing poor attendance with schools, pupils, and families. As a result, attendance across the authority's primary and secondary schools has improved. In 2014-2015, attendance in secondary schools was the highest in Wales.

Schools and officers have worked well together to reduce the rate of longer fixed term exclusions of 6 days or more from secondary schools. However, since the inspection in 2013, the rate of fixed term exclusions of five days or fewer from secondary schools has increased. Although the authority understands the reasons for this and has taken steps to address it, these exclusions remain high, particularly within three schools.

The authority and its partners have improved how they track, identify, and support young people who are at risk of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training). This partnership approach has also improved the exchange of information between stakeholders about how well young people engage in education, training, and employment. As a result, partners identify more quickly those who drop out and keep better track of those young people who need help and support to remain engaged and the number of young people not in education, employment or training is reducing.

Since the 2013 inspection, the Directorate has revised its arrangements for managing and reporting safeguarding to ensure that all education provision falls under the same monitoring arrangements, and with consistency of practice.

Next steps

Your Estyn link inspectors, Gerard Kerlake HMI and Sarah Lewis HMI, will continue their work with the authority, in their normal link role.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and to the Auditor General for Wales for information.

Yours sincerely



Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Auditor General

ⁱ Learning and Skills Service (Directorate) Plan, 2015-2019, Vale of Glamorgan