

27.06.2023

Dear Mr Vickers

On the 6th and 7th June 2023, Alan Edwards HMI and Mark Champion HMI, carried out a pilot monitoring visit which focussed on one recommendation from the local authority's core local government education services inspection in March 2022. The team considered progress against recommendation 4. This visit was jointly agreed with you and the Director of Education. Below is a brief summary of our findings.

Recommendation 4 - Improve strategic leadership of learning and additional learning needs (ALN)

Since the core inspection, the local authority has integrated education and children and families' services under a new strategic director. They have also restructured leadership within the education directorate, including appointing a new Director of Education and two new heads of service. Since these arrangements have been established, relationships between the local authority, their schools and partners have strengthened. There is an increasing culture of openness and transparency between the authority and its schools.

Senior leaders in the local authority meet regularly with senior leaders from the EAS and they are beginning to work more pro-actively together to provide targeted support to identified schools. Where issues have been identified, for example with the quality of School Improvement Partners, the EAS has responded positively to feedback from the local authority. However, it is too early to fully measure the impact of this work. The partnership meetings are a platform for the local authority and regional consortium to discuss support for schools. Currently, these meetings do not always focus on strategic matters, for example the quality and impact of support for schools in the local authority.

Teams within the local authority are working more collaboratively to support their schools. For example, Education Welfare Officers now attend headteacher meetings, engage more regularly with the educational psychology service and meet regularly with senior leaders in schools. This is helping them to identify and support pupils whose attendance causes concern and to identify whole school strategies to improve attendance.

Estyn, Llys Angor/Anchor Court, Heol Keen/Keen Road, Caerdydd/Cardiff, CF24 5JW
Ffôn/Telephone 02920 446446

ymholiadau@estyn.llyw.cymru • enquiries@estyn.gov.wales
www.estyn.llyw.cymru • www.estyn.gov.wales

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A new ALN strategy to guide the implementation of the ALN reforms is close to being finalised in readiness for use from September 2023. The local authority has consulted widely with stakeholders on this strategy. While this strategy has been in development, the local authority has taken suitable action to improve services for pupils with ALN and address shortcomings highlighted at the time of the inspection.

The local authority now has oversight of the use of modified days or reduced timetables for individual pupils in its schools and is taking appropriate action to ensure that such arrangements are fully justified and regularly reviewed. The local authority has agreed clear entry and exit criteria for specialist provision with schools, and through this work has identified the need to expand certain types of provision for September 2023 in order to meet pupils' needs. Reviews have been carried out for all Special Needs Resource Bases within schools. These reviews have highlighted good practice which is being shared across the local authority and each base has an action plan to improve aspects of its provision. Officers have supported headteachers and additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCos) to better understand the requirements of the ALNET Act and develop common approaches to processes around the development of Individual Development Plans.

The local authority has redefined roles and responsibilities of leaders and officers across the directorate. As a result, staff have a clearer understanding of systems and processes for planning their work and are developing an improved understanding about how each service works with schools. The local authority is using a broader range of information to support them to develop a stronger knowledge of their schools, for example, the recent introduction of the local authority's heat map has helped officers to identify schools that are most in need of support and intervention.

The local authority has introduced an internal 'accelerated improvement group' which provides helpful opportunities for leaders to monitor and challenge progress across the directorate. They have also introduced an external 'strategic improvement board' which aims to provide external accountability and assurance to the local authority.

Whilst the local authority has taken a sensible and measured approach to improving leadership capacity across the directorate, it is too early to measure the impact of many of these recent changes.

We hope you found the opportunity to reflect collaboratively on your work helpful. The local authority link inspector for Torfaen will continue to engage with the authority and we will carry out further monitoring visits in the spring and summer terms of 2024.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Jassa Scott'.

Jassa Scott
Strategic Director