

Paul Matthews
Chief Executive
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January 2016

Dear Mr Matthews

Estyn monitoring visit, 23 – 27 November 2015

In November 2012, Estyn inspected Monmouthshire County Council's education services for children and young people. Following this inspection, the authority was judged to require special measures. A monitoring plan was agreed with your Estyn link inspectors, which included a series of four monitoring visits to review how well the local authority was improving. Three monitoring visits took place between February 2014 and March 2015. The final monitoring visit took place in November 2015, and this letter records the outcomes of that visit.

In November 2015, Gerard Kerslake HMI led a team of five inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against all of the six recommendations arising from the inspection in November 2012, and to judge whether the local authority had made sufficient progress to be removed from special measures.

During the monitoring visit, the team held discussions with the leader of the council, the cabinet member for education, the cabinet member for safeguarding, scrutiny committee members, yourself as the chief executive, senior officers, and other relevant staff in the authority. They also met with the chair of the Welsh Government's recovery board, headteachers, school governors, and relevant staff working for the regional school improvement service, Education Achievement Service (EAS). Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including evidence on the progress made on each of Estyn's recommendations.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported their findings to you as the chief executive, the leader of the council, and other key personnel involved in our discussions.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Following this visit, Estyn has judged that Monmouthshire County Council has made strong progress in addressing two of the six recommendations arising from the inspection of November 2012, and satisfactory progress in addressing the other four. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority is no longer in need of special measures and is removing it from further follow-up activity.

Background

In response to Estyn's inspection in November 2012, the authority was initially slow to accept the findings and implement an appropriate post-inspection action plan (PIAP) covering all the shortcomings identified in the inspection report. However, once Estyn raised concerns with the local authority about this initial response, senior leaders responded more vigorously and the pace of progress improved considerably. Elected members and senior officers have demonstrated a clear commitment to improving education provision and outcomes for learners, as well as ensuring all learners are safe.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that safeguarding procedures are robust and underpinned by a clear policy

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

Following the inspection of the local authority in 2012, Monmouthshire County Council has responded well to this recommendation. The Council now give safeguarding a high priority corporately and it is included appropriately in the whole authority strategic risk assessment. Consequently, senior officers and elected members have a better oversight of how its education provision implements safeguarding policies and procedures.

Since the inspection, the authority has revised its corporate safeguarding policies and procedures. This has strengthened the way the children, young people's directorate, and its education services manage their safeguarding responsibilities for learners.

The authority has introduced a 'three tiered' reporting framework for safeguarding, which it uses to inform elected members and officers of the safeguarding issues across the council. The three tiers are the safeguarding strategic overview report, the quarterly report card, and the safeguarding service improvement plan. This reporting framework effectively captures and shares the important information about safeguarding matters in education. The safeguarding quarterly report card provides a more detailed evidence base and analysis of performance information to support the authority's decision-making. All three tiers of reports are published and available to the public.

The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit (the unit) is a very useful corporate resource. The unit supports education provision well, by making available advice, guidance, and support to schools and education services. This has helped improve the rigour in the directorate's management, monitoring and reporting of safeguarding

matters. The unit undertakes regular audits, which provides a range of useful data and analyses. These include an audit of safeguarding policies and procedures as well as compliance with safe recruitment policies in all schools and other education provision.

The unit makes good use of this intelligence, to inform senior officers and elected members about education providers' compliance with its policies, patterns of safeguarding and child protection referrals, allegations of professional abuse and intelligence on the wellbeing of young people. Where necessary, areas which need improvement are appropriately addressed.

Designated safeguarding leads in schools and education services are well supported through regular meetings, group supervision and training. As a result of this support, designated leads have a better understanding of safeguarding issues such as children missing from education and child sexual exploitation.

Staff in schools and in other education provision, as well as school governors, have more opportunities for suitable training. The unit monitors closely the take-up of courses, and reports monthly on this. So far, all education personnel who need it have received tier one training and many have undertaken tier two training.

The Integrated Youth Offer is the name of the local youth support services partnership group. This group is made up of representatives from a suitably wide range of stakeholders and includes the local authority youth service, the police, youth offending service, and voluntary sector youth provision. The group has established agreed standards for the quality of safeguarding policies and procedures, and helpful reporting processes. The group has recently mapped and audited all members' provision to ensure compliance with these standards. The audit enables partners to work together with confidence that the agreed high standards in safe recruitment, and safeguarding training is in place.

The authority is clear about what it still needs to do to improve further its safeguarding activities.

Recommendation 2: Improve standards of attainment for all groups of pupils, particularly in secondary schools

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

Performance in the main indicators across all key stages has improved since the last inspection in November 2012.

When the performance of schools in Monmouthshire is compared with that of similar schools in Wales, based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, performance is above average at Foundation Phase and in key stages 2 and 3.

The proportion of pupils achieving the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics has been above modelled outcomes for the last two years, having been below modelled outcomes for the previous three years. When the performance of schools in Monmouthshire is compared with that of similar

schools in Wales, based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, all schools are in the top half in each of the last two years for performance in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics.

Performance has also improved in other main indicators at key stage 4, including level 1, level 2, capped points score and core subject indicator. When the performance of schools in Monmouthshire is compared with that of similar schools in Wales, based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, half of the schools are above the median for these indicators in 2015. This compares well to 2013 when all schools were below the median for almost all the indicators. However, the proportion of pupils achieving the capped points score in the authority has remained below modelled outcomes since the last inspection.

The Welsh Government sets benchmarks for an authority's performance in key stages 3 and 4 based on free-school-meal entitlement. The authority met two of its three benchmarked targets in 2015 and one of its targets in 2014, having failed to meet any of its targets in 2013.

The progress that pupils make from primary school to the end of secondary school has generally improved well since the core inspection. In 2015, pupils' progress is in line with the progress made by similar pupils in Wales in four out of the five headline indicators. However, progress made by pupils in the core subject indicator remains below average. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved substantially since the last inspection and is well above the Wales average for all indicators at key stage 4 in 2015.

Pupils that are more able generally perform well in the Foundation Phase and in key stages 2 and 3. However, more able pupils do not perform well enough at key stage 4, with too few pupils achieving five or more GCSE A*-A grades.

The gap in performance between boys and girls in the authority compared to the average gap in Wales has narrowed in the majority of indicators at key stage 4 since the last inspection.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the level of challenge to schools and use the full range of powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in underperforming schools

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

The local authority is developing well its work with the regional Educational Achievement Service (EAS) to support and challenge schools more effectively and to improve leadership and management. This has resulted in improvements in outcomes across primary and secondary schools, especially in English and in mathematics at key stage 4.

The authority knows its schools well. There are improved systems for collecting data, based on individual pupil outcomes, which enable officers and advisers to monitor the progress of schools carefully and more accurately. Performance targets are set in collaboration with schools, and this process results in annual targets for

improvement, which are generally realistic and suitably challenging. Challenge advisers work closely with their schools to review the targets regularly. This sharper use of data has provided a sound platform from which to make further improvement.

Overall, the implementation of the categorisation process is fair and robust. Categorisation visits take good account of a wide range of information, including first-hand evidence of the quality of teaching and learning and the quality of leadership. Headteachers are suitably involved in this process, and all judgements are moderated carefully. Schools, governors, and challenge advisers understand the categorisation process well, and are clear about the levels of support associated with each category.

Generally, the categorisation reports for schools provide a detailed summary of the school's performance, provision, and leadership. Many reports identify clear and appropriate areas for improvement. In a few cases, the balance between strengths and areas for improvement does not reflect the category well enough.

Challenge advisers' notes of visits to schools focus suitably on pupils' standards and areas for improvement. However, an evaluation of progress and actions to be taken by the school and the EAS following the visit are generally not clear enough. This means that challenge advisers and schools do not have a clear on-going record of the school's progress against their current goals for improvement.

The authority works appropriately with the EAS to quality assure its work. Officers monitor the activities undertaken by challenge advisers to ensure that a suitable range of evaluative processes take place in schools. The principal challenge adviser and the authority's head of attainment and achievement meet regularly, and have identified inconsistencies in the practice of challenge advisers. They have acted appropriately to address shortcomings. As a result, there is now greater consistency in the way that challenge advisers work with their schools. Formal quality assurance meetings provide a useful opportunity to identify specific issues about the quality of challenge and support that advisers offer to schools. The annual summary of issues provides a helpful list of overall areas for improvement. However, notes of monthly meetings do not provide enough detail about the quality of support and challenge in individual schools or identify specific actions for follow up.

Since the time of the core inspection, the authority has introduced an annual programme of 'stocktakes' whereby representatives from individual schools present an analysis of their progress to officers and cabinet members and EAS representatives. The authority has targeted schools for the stocktakes appropriately, and challenged these schools robustly. However, the records of these meetings do not identify well enough the key areas of strength and priorities for improvement in each school.

The authority has issued five statutory warning notices that identify appropriately the specific areas of concern in each school. These warning notices have assisted the authority to remove the barriers to improvement in each school. As a consequence of two of these warning notices, the authority has used its powers of intervention to bring about changes necessary for improvement. The other three schools have responded well to the actions set for them by the authority, and in these cases, the notices have been withdrawn.

The authority works appropriately with EAS to broker support for teaching and learning and leadership in its schools that is tailored to the specific needs of the school. Support for literacy and numeracy has helped schools well to improve outcomes in English and in mathematics. There are suitable programmes to develop teachers and leaders across the authority. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these programmes.

The authority has developed a collaborative alliance of primary schools to share good practice in leadership and to improve outcomes in the partnership schools. There are early indications that this strategic arrangement is having a positive impact on standards.

Recommendation 4: Improve corporate planning to strengthen links between the local authority's priorities and service level targets

The authority has made strong progress in addressing this recommendation.

Overall, the children and young peoples' directorate's (CYP) approach to planning is much improved from the time of the inspection. This approach has helped to bring a better focus to the actions and activities of the service areas within the directorate and has helped to improve provision and outcomes in important areas.

Improving educational outcomes is one of the authority's core priorities. This priority was reaffirmed by the council in its 'Partnership Administration Continuance Agreement', which outlines its agenda for the period up to May 2017. This emphasis suitably reflects the priorities for education set out in the Single Integrated Plan.

The directorate has increased its capacity for strategic and operational leadership and management, which includes the appointment of a permanent chief officer for children and young people in May 2013. As a result, there is now a clearer direction to the work of the directorate.

The CYP directorate has useful service improvement plans for each service area. The service area plans are suitably quality assured by senior officers. The plans follow a helpful, common template and bring appropriate consistency to the directorate's plans. The directorate's plans are more coherent and better focused than at the time of the inspection and this has helped to support improvements in, for example, the provision for additional learning needs, outcomes in schools and in the authority's youth service.

The authority identifies well and records relevant risks relating to different levels in its plans. There is an appropriate link from the specific risks in the service level plans to the strategic, broader risks in the high-level plans. The risk registers also include suitable actions to mitigate the risks.

Recommendation 5: Improve self-evaluation across all services and make better use of data to plan services strategically and target resources appropriately

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

Since the inspection in November 2012, senior officers and elected members have improved their understanding of the performance of the children and young people's directorate.

Self-evaluation processes have become more honest and accurate. Generally, officers have a clearer understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement within their service areas. Overall, they use this information more effectively to inform their planning.

However, the directorate does not always capture the areas for improvement well enough in its key documents. For example, the authority's self-evaluation report (SER), based on the Estyn Common Inspection Framework, does not highlight areas for improvement clearly and, as a result, it is not a useful tool to inform planning. Overall, the SER is too descriptive and does not consistently analyse data well enough.

The directorate's quarterly monitoring of service plans indicates the progress made against actions. However, the end of year evaluations focus largely on what has been achieved, and do not identify well enough any areas that either have not been addressed, or where progress has not been good enough.

The directorate is continuing to improve the quality of its reports to the relevant scrutiny committee. Elected members are now providing a better level of challenge.

The authority has a much better understanding of its schools. Improved target setting in schools means that the authority is able to evaluate more effectively, whether progress in raising standards is quick enough. However, the access that schools have to management information systems is still too inconsistent.

The directorate's use of performance data has improved, for example in identifying progress of vulnerable groups and pupils with additional learning needs. Officers track the progress of learners who participate in intervention programmes, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes and to determine whether further intervention is required. The authority has improved the range of data in the youth service, which means that officers and partners have a better understanding of how the provision helps learners to progress and achieve.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that performance management is effective and robust and allows elected members and senior officers to identify and address underperformance

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

The directorate's performance management processes have improved since the last inspection. The directorate follows the local authority's revised corporate performance assessment process, which is providing a more robust system to manage performance.

The directorate's staff have formal performance reviews twice a year with their line managers. These meetings identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to individuals' responsibilities. In addition, they have regular programmed meetings to discuss general aspects of their work. These meetings cover areas such as behaviours, staff culture, and forward planning. Individuals and teams within the directorate now have a clearer understanding of their roles and how their work contributes to the directorate's and wider corporate priorities. However, the authority has not formally evaluated the overall effectiveness of the staff performance management and appraisal processes.

The directorate's lead officers are held to account formally in head of service challenge meetings by the council leader, senior leadership team, and relevant officers. This process is helping the senior leaders to understand better the challenges facing education service areas and to consider ways of removing obstacles to improvement. However, the authority has not evaluated the effectiveness of this approach, and as this part of the process is resource intensive, it is not clear if it is sustainable into the long term.

The authority has suitable arrangements for holding EAS to account. EAS is providing better quality information to the authority on standards and leadership in schools, which in turn enables the authority to identify underperformance, to hold school leaders to account more robustly and to use its statutory powers where necessary. These arrangements have helped to improve the outcomes achieved by their pupils. There is also an increasing rigour to and better clarity in the process of setting school attainment targets. This is helping to promote higher expectations for improvement across the local authority's schools.

The authority has appropriate arrangements for scrutinising the education directorate's work. The arrangements align well with the monitoring of the post inspection action plan and the priorities of the education department. Scrutiny officers have worked well with elected members to help improve their understanding of key educational issues and to equip them with the information and skills to challenge officers and the lead member appropriately.

Progress on the improvement in services for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN)

In the inspection in November 2012, support for additional learning needs (ALN) was judged to be unsatisfactory. Since that time, the local authority has made significant

progress in addressing the shortcomings identified. Following the inspection, the directorate carried out a comprehensive review of ALN services, which included extensive consultation with children and young people, parents and carers, and schools. There is now a clear strategy, with a focus on building the capacity of schools to meet the needs of pupils with ALN and ensuring that specialist provision is fit for purpose.

Through working very closely with schools and parents, the directorate has made sure that more pupils can access the support they need quickly without the need for a statement of special educational needs (SEN). A comprehensive programme of support and training means that schools are becoming more confident to provide for pupils with a range of needs and this has led to a reduction in referrals for additional support.

The authority now uses data to track more effectively the progress of pupils with ALN in relation to their individual targets. There are effective processes in place to monitor the work of schools, both at a strategic and individual pupil level. This enables officers to provide appropriate support and challenge.

Next steps

There are a number of important areas covered in our report, which require further and continued improvement. The authority should further improve the quality of self-evaluation within the CYP directorate as well as addressing the areas for improvement in the delivery of school improvement services highlighted in this letter. The recent work of the recovery board has been valuable in guiding the authority in its improvement work and the authority should consider continuing to engage with external experts to ensure that there is no easing in the pace of improvement and to advise on specific issues where required. The authority should also work in partnership with other authorities in order to develop efficient ways of working to address common issues and challenges in providing education services.

Your link inspectors will continue their work with the authority, in their normal link role.

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

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Auditor General for Wales