

Mr Jeremy Patterson  
Chief Executive  
Powys County Council  
County Hall  
Llandrindod Wells  
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LD1 5LG

8 November 2012

Dear Mr Patterson

### **Estyn monitoring visit, 1 to 5 October 2012**

Following the outcome of the inspection of education services for children and young people in February 2011, the authority was identified as requiring an Estyn monitoring visit as follow-up to that inspection. The monitoring visit took place from 1 to 5 October 2012, and this letter records the outcomes of that visit. This letter is published on the Estyn website.

Mrs Betsan O'Connor HMI led a team of six inspectors to review the progress made against the recommendations arising from the earlier inspection. The team also considered the current performance of the authority, which led to further areas for improvement being identified.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, senior officers, head teachers and school governors. They scrutinised documentation, including evidence on the progress made against each of the inspection recommendations. They also considered outcomes from all Estyn inspections of schools in the authority undertaken since the original local authority education services inspection in 2011. The team also liaised with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to the leader of the council, cabinet member for education, chief executive, strategic director for skills and learning, head of schools service and director of children's services.

### **Outcome of the monitoring visit**

Since the inspection in February 2011, the pace of improvement within the authority and its schools, as well as the progress against the recommendations left by the inspection team, has been limited and too slow.

In 2011, performance levels in secondary schools declined since the previous inspection when compared to those in similar schools across Wales on free-school-meal benchmarks. Performance improved in 2012 but has not yet returned to its previous benchmark level at the time of the previous inspection. The performance of primary schools has not improved enough in the last two years.

It is clear that key elected members (leader, lead member for education, chair of scrutiny committee) the chief executive, and the strategic director are aware of the shortcomings and challenges within education services for children and young people. They know and understand what needs to be done to overcome the barriers to progress. These senior officers and members are currently leading a gradual process of cultural change in order to bring about a transparent and accountable approach to improvement within the authority. However, progress is slow and at a very early stage.

The authority's arrangements for self-evaluation are not rigorous enough. This means that important shortcomings and challenges within education services for children and young people are missed. The authority does not self-evaluate effectively, and cannot therefore use self-knowledge to plan for improvement. The weaknesses in self-evaluation at the corporate level are also reflected at service level.

As a result, the self-evaluation provided for the team, in advance of the monitoring visit, is too positive and descriptive. It does not identify the shortcomings identified by the inspection team or the lack of progress against the recommendations. In addition, too many key officers were not involved in the preparation of the self-evaluation report and it was not shared with head teachers or other stakeholders.

Since the last inspection, and under the leadership of two administrations, the scrutiny committee has found it difficult on many occasions to access important information, such as that on the performance of schools, which hinders their ability to exercise their statutory function. The schools service has not responded well enough to requests by members for information and documentation. In addition, officers do not present information clearly and in the most helpful or objective way to enable elected members to make decisions. This situation is unsatisfactory.

Generally, the authority does not make full use of the information or data available to enable it to plan strategically or allocate resources efficiently. During the last year, members have highlighted concerns about the progress against the post-inspection plan and questioned whether officers made best use of resources to deliver the necessary actions. However, officers have not responded to these concerns.

### **Progress on the recommendations outlined in the report of 2011**

#### **Recommendation 1: Improve the challenge to schools, particularly in relation to evaluating leadership and management, and use its full range of powers to improve schools more quickly**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Since the last inspection the local authority has made progress in improving its level of challenge to schools. Much of this improvement had come through the use of the regional consortium's challenge framework. This has set a consistent agenda for officers to follow and made sure that discussions with schools in their autumn link visits are focused on standards. However, the challenge presented by link officers to leadership teams is not consistent or rigorous enough to make sure that all schools improve sufficiently. The processes that the authority uses to quality assure the work of officers and ensure a consistency of challenge to schools are not effective.

The authority uses the challenge framework of the regional consortium to categorise its schools against clearly explained criteria for school improvement support. The authority's partnership agreement sets out the support a school will be entitled to as a result of this categorisation. Head teachers understand well the category their school is in, although they are less clear about the support they will receive as a result. However, in a minority of schools the categorisation is over generous and does not challenge the school sufficiently to improve. In addition, the authority does not build the agreed days of support into the work plans of its officers, with the result that it does not know whether it can deliver the entitlements for support to its schools.

Officers also carry out a rolling programme of school reviews, which cover standards, provision and leadership. Schools understand their entitlement to these. However, the timing of these reviews relies too heavily on Estyn's inspection cycle rather than focusing on those schools that need to improve the most. The resulting reports clearly identify strengths and offer recommendations for further action. However, many do not identify areas for improvement clearly enough to support schools to address issues.

The quality of written records of visits to schools is variable. These are often descriptive, and a minority do not have any follow-up actions, whilst only a very few identify timescales for actions. These records are not always sent to schools. System leaders from the regional consortium have generally provided effective support to improve secondary schools in bands 4 and 5 and also to a small number of primary schools. However, this support has not always focused sufficiently on challenging the quality of senior leadership, particularly in secondary schools.

Since the last inspection, two schools have been identified as requiring special measures and one school has been identified as requiring significant improvement. In total during this inspection cycle the authority has three schools requiring significant improvement and three schools requiring special measures. This is more than any other authority in Wales. However, the authority has only made limited use of its full powers in order to improve schools quickly enough. Where it has used these powers the schools have already been placed into a category of concern by Estyn. Other schools have received an informal warning from the local authority but there is not yet evidence of the impact of these.

### **Recommendation 2: Improve the consistency and accuracy of teacher assessment at key stages 1 and 2**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

The Powys Assessment Task Group has provided helpful guidance and training on assessment for schools, which included the sharing of best practice within the local authority. However, too much emphasis has been placed on meeting statutory requirements rather than improving the ability of all teachers to assess pupils' work accurately.

School Effectiveness Officers have monitored assessment processes in a sample of schools and their reports provided helpful analyses and highlighted areas for improvement. The majority of the schools monitored have improved their assessment processes, although in others teacher assessment is not consistently accurate.

However, officers did not achieve half of the authority's own target for the number of schools to be monitored. As a result, the authority does not have a full enough picture of the impact of their interventions to know whether the consistency and accuracy of assessment has improved overall.

**Recommendation 3: Make sure that all schools' additional learning needs (ALN) services are planned and monitored strategically, and make best use of staff expertise**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Overall progress in addressing this recommendation has been slow.

The local authority has a clear vision for developing services for learners with additional learning needs (ALN), with a focus on high quality local provision and well-co-ordinated multi-agency support.

However, strategic planning to secure improvement is not well established. Progress in developing a strategic plan has been too slow. Although this plan appropriately identifies most of the key priorities, it is incomplete and does not link closely enough to current business and action plans. Expectations for the pace of progress in meeting the recommendations and developing ALN services have been low and timescales too long. Senior managers have not effectively monitored and challenged the work that has been done. They have also failed to plan appropriately to make the best use of available resources.

The local authority has made good progress in addressing a few elements of the strategy, such as the development of specialist centres and the establishment of an Integrated Disability Service and Integrated Family and Behaviour Support Service. ALN staff have carried out a range of appropriate audits, which have helped them to identify areas for development. However, they have not analysed this information fully or used it well enough to inform strategic planning. The local authority has made slow progress in collecting and analysing data on pupil outcomes. This means that it is unable to measure the impact of interventions on pupil progress or provide rigorous enough challenge to schools.

**Recommendation 4: Improve performance management, including the analysis of the impact of services and resources on all learners and then using the information to plan and prioritise service delivery for the future**

This recommendation has not been addressed.

The authority's new corporate performance management process has only been in operational use for limited time. As yet, this has not influenced improvement or accountability within local authority services for children and young people. In addition, the schools service has prepared a weak performance management framework, which does not hold officers to account or monitor performance effectively.

Planning at a strategic level is not focused clearly enough on outcomes. The authority has not put in place effective arrangements to guide its planning for improvement. The lack of useful milestones and quantifiable outcome measures at all levels of planning means that managing and monitoring performance is difficult. Many of the processes to manage performance are informal and ineffective. Processes are not successful in holding the right people to account for improvement or progress. In general, the authority has not held individual officers to account for their performance. In addition, in the schools service, officers' time allocation is not planned in order to align the needs of the work with the available resources. Inadequate performance and resource management means that important areas of the authority's work are not done.

**Recommendation 5: Take effective action to reduce school budget deficits**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

The local authority has been slow to get in place the revised governance framework needed if it is to improve the management of delegated funding to its schools. Consequently, 18 months after the last inspection by Estyn, the local authority still has its original guidance and procedures in place. The local authority has consulted upon new financial regulations and guidance. These draft revisions are now clearer about the range of responsibilities of those involved in school funding, the processes for monitoring expenditure, the limitations to delegated authority for spending and the controls and sanctions the local authority is able to apply where spending goes beyond pre-defined limits. However, key documents remain in draft, and have been piloted in a few schools only.

In July 2012, cabinet agreed strict criteria for the management of the large budget deficits. These criteria include a loan facility with tightly defined conditions, and the requirement for schools to produce appropriate and fully costed recovery plans within clear tight timescales, which are subject to approval at strategic director level.

The local authority has also provided support to help schools improve how they manage their budget, with a particular focus on the four most overspent schools. Consequently, budget deficits are slowly reducing. In addition, four schools with a history of large surpluses have significantly reduced these and another school has moved from deficit to surplus. However, at the end of the 2011-2012 financial year, there are still 12 schools with unlicensed budgets.

All four of the secondary schools with high deficit budgets have produced draft recovery plans. However, even though these plans include reductions in staffing, none of them includes any risk analysis or impact assessment of this on the curriculum, quality of education or pupil standards. It therefore remains unclear if the proposed budget reductions will hinder or support the necessary improvements in pupil standards in each of these overspending and under-performing schools.

### **Recommendation 6: Maintain the momentum of the modernising education programme**

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

In the past year the local authority has closed 14 primary schools removing 392 places. The local authority has also removed 180 surplus places in one secondary school. There are agreed plans to reduce secondary surplus places further by removing redundant temporary classrooms, and the re-designation for community use of some areas of the school sites. However, this pace of change is too slow as pupil numbers continue to drop.

Although the local authority has maintained its focus on its modernising education programme, the progress towards the achievement of its ambitious goals has been slow. The local authority has clearly focused its drive for modernising education on the key goals of improving standards, improving the quality of education buildings and greater parity of pupil spending

The local authority has identified many of the factors which have prevented area boards<sup>1</sup> from more speedily moving forward local reforms. Although the local authority knows what it has to do, improvements to the terms of reference for area boards remain in draft format.

Through effective cooperation, providers have produced a very useful Powys wide post-16 prospectus, which has helped more students choose courses from a wider range of sites. Also, this has led to a reduction in the number of duplicate courses, resulting in a substantial saving. However, there is still no agreement between the local authority, its schools and Coleg Powys over establishing a commonly agreed delivery model for post-16 provision. Partners have agreed the general direction of travel and have established a central commissioning methodology to plan and fund courses.

### **Next steps**

As a result of these findings, and the slow progress against recommendations, the authority will move from Estyn monitoring and be placed in the category of an authority in need of significant improvement. A team of HMI will return in not less than 12 months to judge progress. The scope of that visit is to be confirmed.

The authority will now have 50 days to prepare an action plan. This action plan needs to outline the steps the authority will take to implement the necessary improvements. The plan needs to clearly identify who will take responsibility for tasks, contain milestones, and identify relevant resources and how success will be

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<sup>1</sup> Local boards set up to lead the modernisation of education in a local area

evidenced. In addition to the recommendations noted below, the authority should respond to all the issues noted in this letter.

Your Estyn Link Inspectors, Betsan O'Connor HMI and Mererid Stone HMI will continue to monitor overall progress and the action plan through their HMI link role with the authority.

## **Recommendations**

In order to bring about the necessary improvements in a timely manner, the authority should:

- develop effective self-evaluation procedures;
- make sure that performance management processes are robust and hold officers to account;
- ensure that the work of the Schools Service is planned effectively, quality assured rigorously and evaluated robustly in order to improve its impact upon learners;
- ensure that strategic planning is focused consistently on achieving better outcomes for learners and that it is responsive to Welsh Government guidance on single plans; and
- take timely action to deliver its education modernisation programme.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and to the Wales Audit Office for information.

Yours sincerely



**Clive Phillips**  
Assistant Director