



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

**A report on the quality of local authority education
services for children and young people**

in

**Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
The Pavilions
Cambrian Park
Clydach Vale
Tonypandy
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March 2012

by

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

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on their capacity to improve.

In these evaluations, we use a four-point scale:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Unsatisfactory

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.

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Context

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Rhondda Cynon Taf is located in South East Wales. It is bordered by Cardiff to the south, Caerphilly and Merthyr to the east, Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot to the west and Powys to the north. The total population is 234,309.

In Rhondda Cynon Taf, 18% of people over the age of three say they can speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 24.8%.

The employment rate in Rhondda Cynon Taf was 62.3% compared to the Wales average of 66.4%. Nearly 25% of children live in workless households. Of the working population in Rhondda Cynon Taf, 18% have no qualifications, which is higher than the Wales average of 13.7%.

The percentage of pupils of compulsory school age eligible for free school meals is 25.2%. This is higher than the national figure of 19.7%. Only one other authority in Wales has a higher level of eligibility (PLASC 2011).

Eighteen of the 152 areas in Rhondda Cynon Taf are now in the 10% most deprived areas in Wales.

As of 31 March 2010, Rhondda Cynon Taf had 550 children being looked after by the authority. There were 340 children on the Child Protection register.

Ethnic minorities account for 2% of the population, lower than the Wales average of 3.6%

Finance

The Welsh Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council for 2011-2012 per head of population was £1,762 (based on 2010 mid-year population figures), which is above the Wales average £1,697.

The Council set its overall revenue budget at 103% of SSA, above the Wales average of 100.2%. It set the education budget at a level of 104.5% of its indicative budget allocation (IBA), above the Wales average of 99.5%.

The Council set its education budget at £4,718 per pupil net of grants. This is slightly below the Wales average of £4,770.

Welsh Government figures show that in 2011-2012 the authority delegated 75% of the available education budget to schools. This level of delegation is marginally below the Welsh average of 76%.

Summary

Overall judgement: Adequate

The local authority's education services for children and young people are adequate because:

- the authority is improving its knowledge and understanding of its schools through the better use of data;
- support for learners with additional learning needs is improving and impacting well on learners;
- elected members have taken difficult decisions recently regarding school closures;
- the authority has a long history of partnership working and mature relationships, which helps to deliver joint working effectively; and
- the authority's leadership is beginning to focus more sharply on raising standards for learners.

However:

- standards are average in key stages 1, 2 and 3 and too low in key stage 4;
- the authority's use of data is improving but it does not evaluate and analyse outcomes effectively enough to benefit individual and groups of learners;
- attendance is below average in secondary schools and well below average in primary schools compared to levels in similar schools across Wales;
- the number of surplus places is too high, although there are firm plans in place to address this;
- the quality of the leadership and management of schools is too inconsistent; and
- levels of challenge and scrutiny are not robust enough across services and partnerships.

Capacity to improve: Adequate

The local authority has adequate prospects for improvement because:

- leaders and managers have a strong commitment to deliver the necessary changes to improve standards for learners; and
- the authority is committed to collaborative and partnership working.

However:

- performance in 2011, taking into account the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals, has declined since previous years;
- improvements are too recent to demonstrate a successful track record;
- previous recommendations to improve attendance and reduce surplus places were not addressed fully; and
- management changes in the authority are too new to demonstrate their impact on learners.

Recommendations

In order to improve, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council needs to:

- R1 raise standards in schools particularly in key stage 4;
- R2 improve attendance rates in all schools;
- R3 improve the evaluation and analyses of data across service areas and partnerships to drive improvements in outcomes for learners;
- R4 use the full powers available to the authority to improve leadership and management in schools;
- R5 reduce surplus places; and
- R6 improve the rigour and the level of scrutiny and challenge across all services and partnerships.

What happens next?

Rhondda Cynon Taf Council will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 70 days (50 working days) of receipt of the report. Estyn is of the opinion that the authority falls into the follow-up category of an Estyn monitoring visit.

During all core inspections, the inspection team considers whether a local authority needs any follow-up activity.

There are five types of follow-up activity:

- 1 Good practice case study
- 2 Link inspector monitoring
- 3 Estyn monitoring visit
- 4 Significant improvement
- 5 Special measures

Any follow-up inspection work will be planned in consideration of other inspection and regulatory activity within an authority. All follow-up inspections will be fed into the Local Authority Regulatory Calendar to avoid duplication and take advantage of any opportunities to work more closely with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes? Adequate

Standards: Adequate

The proportion of pupils in Rhondda Cynon Taf who are eligible for free school meals is the second highest in Wales. When these high levels of deprivation are taken into account, pupil performance is adequate overall. When the performance of Rhondda Cynon Taf schools is compared with that of similar schools in Wales, based on the percentage eligible for free school meals, performance is average overall in key stages 1, 2 and 3. It is also average at key stage 4 on two of the five main indicators. However, performance on the other three indicators including the level 2 threshold with English or Welsh and mathematics, is below average. Over half the schools are below the middle and too many schools are in the bottom 25%.

In previous years, Rhondda Cynon Taf met or exceeded all three of the Welsh Government's benchmarks for performance based on free-school-meal entitlement. However, in 2011 it just failed to meet two of these benchmarks. In 2011, the percentage of learners leaving full-time education without a recognised qualification did not improve as quickly as in Wales as a whole.

Progress between primary and secondary schools is below average in key stage 3 and average overall in key stage 4.

In 2011, in key stages 1 and 3, the gap in performance on the core subject indicator between boys and girls was smaller than the average across Wales. However, in key stage 2 and key stage 4 the gap was wider than the average for Wales. The gap in performance between learners entitled to free school meals and other learners was similar to that of Wales as a whole.

Particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional learning needs, generally make the progress expected between the key stages. Learners who receive support to improve their literacy and numeracy skills make good progress and many maintain this improvement to end of the key stage. The authority has recently introduced a reading test in all of its schools. These tests indicate that at the end of key stage 2 more than the average proportion of learners have reading ages below functional literacy.

In 2011, performance in Welsh first language was good in primary schools although below average in key stage 3. At key stage 4, performance was good in both Welsh first and second language.

Learners gain a good variety of qualifications as a result of the wide range of opportunities provided in non-formal and informal settings.

Wellbeing: Adequate

Attendance is below average in secondary schools and well below average in primary schools, when compared to that of similar schools based on the percentage

of pupils eligible for free school meals. Too many schools are in the bottom 25% and too few are in the top 25%.

The rate of both permanent and fixed-term exclusions from schools increased in 2011. However, the number of days lost from fixed-term exclusions is lower than the Wales average.

Post-16 progression rates to school and college are good, and the rate has increased over the last four years. The percentage of Year 11 pupils not in education, training or employment (NEET) increased in 2010, and was not as good as the average for Wales. However, provisional and unverified data for 2011 suggests that this has improved and is better than the average for Wales.

Outcomes for learners from more general programmes for wellbeing are improving. Learners participate well and learn well from schools' and youth work initiatives. Rates of participation in sports activities are good and improving when compared with all Wales involvement rates. A high proportion of learners benefit from a wide range of initiatives in primary, secondary and youth work settings. These include breakfast clubs, the family-based On Track programme, E3+ and after school activities. Most who participate in counselling services improve their behaviour, attendance and attainment.

Learners contribute well to decisions about policy and provision for children and young people. For example, over 9,000 young people contributed to a survey in 2010-2011. In most cases, the authority uses outcomes from learners' contributions effectively to plan service improvements.

Key Question 2: How good is provision? Adequate

Support for school improvement: Adequate

The authority has recently improved its processes to support, challenge and intervene in schools. Specifically, processes to categorise schools are sharper, reviews are more focused, and the direct engagement of the chief education officer is more effective. There is now a strong culture of challenge, led by the recently appointed director of education. Officers are starting to tackle underperformance more robustly, such as recently managing the weak performance of some primary headteachers. However, these arrangements to identify and intervene in underperforming schools are relatively recent and have not yet had time to make a significant impact on standards of attainment in schools.

The authority has improved its knowledge and understanding of its schools. It provides schools with a good range of data analysis and officers increasingly use this to identify underperforming schools and to target interventions. However, relevant information is held in different databases, and therefore it is difficult for the authority to pull together a comprehensive set of information that officers need to identify and target underperformance more efficiently.

The authority has set clear criteria and categories for intervention, challenge and support, and has devised its own banding system for primary schools. Most

headteachers understand the band and category their school is in and the support that they will receive. However, a minority of primary schools are not clear whether it is the challenge and support category or the authority's banding system that drives the interventions in their schools.

Senior officers have commissioned wide-ranging reviews in particular schools that are causing concern. These reviews include a clear focus on the quality of leadership and management in the school. However, officers do not routinely evaluate all aspects of leadership and management in every school. In a small number of schools, officers have not been aware of the issues that led to the school being placed into Estyn follow-up as a result of inspection.

Processes to quality assure the work of officers and the challenge they bring to schools are improving but are not yet secure enough to make sure that all officers perform consistently. As a result, too many schools do not improve quickly enough. A high proportion of schools are identified as needing follow-up after their inspections and at present two primary schools are in need of significant improvement. The authority has not yet used its full range of powers to improve schools.

Collaboration between school improvement officers and those other authority services such as access and social inclusion is not yet well enough developed to impact on standards for all learners.

The authority supports a range of useful initiatives that address national priorities, including literacy, numeracy and the Foundation Phase. The authority's recently introduced literacy strategy, albeit comprehensive, has yet to impact on standards.

The authority provides good support for new leaders in schools, including the use of peer mentors in primary schools. Support for governors is generally good. Officers attend governing body meetings to present annual performance reports to help governors to carry out their roles more effectively.

Support for additional learning needs: Good

The authority has made good progress since the last inspection. Assessments of the support needs of learners with additional learning needs have improved significantly. Provision for learners with autistic spectrum disorder has developed well. It helps learners to achieve and to progress well.

The authority is delivering its statutory obligations in respect of children and young people with additional learning needs well. At 1.5%, Rhondda Cynon Taf has one of the lowest percentages of pupils with statements in Wales. Parents and carers are confident that the authority will meet their children's needs without the need for a statement, and feel well supported by the work of the authority's parent partnership group. This results in very few appeals being made to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales (SENTW).

Support services track and monitor effectively the progress of individuals and groups of learners who receive targeted support. However, only a few of these services evaluate data and challenge schools well enough to improve outcomes for pupils.

This is because the authority does not yet have an effective enough system for collating and evaluating all data on the performance of all pupils with additional needs. This would enable them to have a clearer picture of whether all learners with additional learning needs are making the progress they should. This does not help the authority to plan and target service improvements effectively enough.

The authority is helping schools to improve their own capacity to provide for the needs of learners with a wide range of additional learning needs. However, in areas such as speech, language and communication difficulties and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, further work is required.

In a recent Additional Needs Funding pilot, the authority delegated funding to one cluster of schools. Headteachers used these resources in a more flexible manner to meet pupils' needs. This delegation model is not yet available across all school clusters. Because of this, the authority does not have enough evidence to evaluate its impact on improving outcomes for learners.

The access and inclusion service works well with a range of multi-agency partners. However, collaboration with school improvement officers is not effective enough in helping to raise standards for all learners.

Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing: Adequate

The authority recognises clearly the challenge it faces in improving learners' attendance. Since the last inspection in 2010, it has invested significant resources to help schools to improve learners' attendance, and based a recent reorganisation of services on good practice identified in other local authorities and on effective consultations with schools. The new attendance and wellbeing strategy is supported well with a two-year business plan. The attendance and wellbeing service has good data systems to track learner progress. However, these changes have not improved attendance rates to date, which remain consistently poor.

Behaviour support is improving and the authority has strengthened and formalised its managed move protocol. Schools receive good training to increase their capacity to deal with behaviour issues themselves, which they value highly. Data to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies, together with the impact of policies regarding racist behaviour, are not sufficiently robust enough to identify trends in these aspects of behaviour. Overall, targets for behaviour improvement are not challenging enough, and the number of exclusions has been increasing.

The local authority has a good range of support services and programmes for children and young people. It gives high levels of support to programmes that help young unemployed people gain skills and jobs. It is due to implement a multi-agency team-around-the-family approach for more robust support mechanisms where needed. Looked-after children receive good support, and the counselling services are very good.

Youth support services have a good focus on helping many learners to gain skills and credits. Collaboration and joint planning between youth clubs has enabled a few to improve learners' engagement. The development of Youth Operational Cluster

Groups in the youth service has strengthened the involvement of other support agencies.

The local authority has a clear policy and procedures relating to safeguarding. Systems ensure that education and partners' staff undergo appropriate CRB checks and monitoring. A structured programme of safeguarding training is delivered to staff. However, systems to ensure that the training database is up-to-date are not robust enough.

Access and school places: Adequate

Numbers of surplus places in primary and secondary schools remain too high. Since the last inspection, the authority has begun to address this by implementing appropriate plans and proposals for school reorganisation, which are intended to reduce surplus places to 16% over a seven-year period. These plans include closing schools, amalgamating others, refurbishing existing schools and opening new schools. Currently, the authority is at an advanced stage of proposals to close three secondary schools and build one new secondary school.

Officers have secured commitment from elected members to delivering these plans through a £160 million 21st century schools programme, which includes an indicative approval of £75 million from the Welsh Government.

The council has an appropriate and up-to-date database on the condition, suitability and sufficiency of all its schools, which it uses well to address repairs and maintenance issues.

Information on the capacity of schools and their admissions numbers is secure and up to date. The majority of schools are satisfied with the admissions process and the support provided by the authority. All secondary pupils receive a place in their first choice school and nearly all primary pupils receive their first parental-preference choice.

The child-care sufficiency audit shows that there are enough nursery places available for all parents who request one, and staff in early years settings receive good quality training in their work.

Rhondda Cynon Taf has a good range of youth support services for young people across the authority. However, it does not have an appropriate overview of these services, or a clear understanding about which are youth services and which are wider youth support services. There is a lack of clarity about how different services work best together to meet young people's needs. Not all relevant officers and partners know if or how these services are co-ordinated to ensure that all young people have access to their entitlements. This means that they cannot co-ordinate these services effectively enough.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management? Adequate

Leadership: Good

Since the last inspection, the authority has taken decisive action to improve services for learners. Elected members and senior leaders have a good understanding of education issues across the authority and know that the pace of improvement has not met their aspirations.

Because of this, the director has undertaken a high-level strategic review of the service. He has agreed new priorities for education around the themes of attendance, literacy, numeracy, using data to improve accountability for performance and improving the learning environment.

The use of data is improving gradually, which helps officers to challenge schools more effectively and hold school leadership teams to account for the performance of their schools. Officers reports to Council give clear details on progress, although this change process is too recent to see its impact on standards.

The council has a clear hierarchy of plans with consistent linkages between priorities. A corporate planning template gives good consistency to business planning across the authority. The Council's improvement plan has clearly stated improvement objectives. Performance reporting is centrally co-ordinated, which enables elected members to access appropriate information relating to overall service performance. However, elected members do not routinely receive reports at individual school level. This means that members are not able to challenge performance effectively enough.

Elected members have shown their capacity to take difficult decisions, particularly in terms of individual school closures and in drawing up ambitious plans for post-16 education and training and for the council's 21st century schools programme.

Quality improvement: Adequate

Since the last inspection, the authority has set a clear focus for improvement in order to address underperformance and raise standards for all learners. Elected members and senior leaders know the strengths and areas for development in services for children and young people well. They have implemented appropriate actions to bring about change. Because of this, appropriate progress is happening across all service areas. However, despite this progress, the authority has not fully achieved all of the recommendations from the previous inspection, in particular those about improving attendance and reducing surplus places.

Scrutiny committees identify and intervene appropriately where aspects of education cause concern. For example, the Education and Lifelong Scrutiny Committee and the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee worked well together to challenge concerns about the governance of the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP), which is termed 'Fframwaith'. However, not all of the recommendations made by scrutiny are implemented.

Information to scrutiny is not always clear enough to enable the scrutiny committee to provide a robust challenge to services. New arrangements have begun to address this.

Elected members and officers engaged well in the preparation of the self-evaluation report for the inspection. Evaluation is routine across the authority, and the directorate has a useful process and timetable to co-ordinate service level self-evaluation. However, evaluation reports are too descriptive and lack sufficient analysis to help the authority to use this intelligence effectively enough.

Learners and other stakeholders engage well in the evaluation of initiatives to support education and training. However, too often evaluations contain only user perceptions and do not consider how well the initiative has impacted upon priority needs or upon outcomes for learners.

The authority identifies risks and hurdles to progress well. It has started to use its full powers appropriately to improve the performance of schools when necessary.

The local authority is data rich, having a wide range of useful data available. However, the authority does not make best use this information. Services do not share information well enough across different data sets, and it is not available from one central source for all services to access easily.

Partnership working: Adequate

Partnership working is strong in Rhondda Cynon Taf. It has developed well over many years and forms a good foundation on which to bring about change and drive improvements for learners. However, the authority is not able to demonstrate how well outcomes from partnership work impact upon learners, particularly for the activities aimed at improving achievement, attainment, and wellbeing.

The authority works well with internal, external, and cross-boundary partners and readily adapts to meet new policies and initiatives for learners in the area. It has a clear view of strategic partnerships and generally has a good understanding of their different roles and responsibilities. However, the accountability for the statutory duty of the effective co-ordination of youth support services is not understood well enough.

The CYPP 'Fframwaith' has a very good record of developing a wide variety of activities and initiatives to meet local priorities. However, for its youth support services provision, Fframwaith does not have a clear strategy. It does not have an up-to-date needs analysis to match against a service analysis, or a clear resource analysis. Performance management is not clear and the accountability of partners and levels of challenge to partnership performance have not improved enough.

The partnership between education services and schools is improving, but it is not yet effective enough in achieving improvements in outcomes for all learners.

The Local Service Board and elected members have recognised the need to improve partnership structures and outcomes, and have recently undertaken a strategic review of statutory partnerships. As a result of this, a single integrated planning process is in development, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of statutory partnerships.

The authority is contributing well to the development of the Central South consortium school improvement service. Rhondda Cynon Taf is the host authority for the new service and the leader of the authority is the Lead Member for the consortium. Elected members and senior officers have high levels of commitment to this.

Resource management: Adequate

The authority has protected the individual schools' budgets well from the impact of funding cuts, which reflects clearly its commitment to education.

The authority's business planning aligns well to strong medium-term financial planning, effective financial management and workforce planning. This makes proposed improvements feasible. However, the authority does not always use data effectively enough when planning for improvement.

Service restructuring is re-aligning staff resources well to support learning and improvement more effectively. Staff take part in a good range of development programmes through the authority's workforce development programme. This includes a plan to extend a senior management development programme to senior teachers.

The authority has allocated additional funding to its five educational priorities. It also makes good use of alternative funding sources to enable successful projects to continue.

The authority uses funding for learners with additional learning needs well. It has reduced out-of-county placements, developed clear exit and entry criteria, and has low numbers of appeals and statements. The authority is beginning to improve the use of evaluations to inform better the planning of resources.

The authority works constructively with schools to increase delegated funding. The pilot model of delegating funding to school clusters has worked well, and consultation on further delegation is planned.

The Council has appropriate arrangements to evaluate the sufficiency and suitability of buildings for learning. It has allocated an annual budget of £6m to deliver a schools maintenance programme.

The provision of financial support to schools is good. The authority monitors and challenges schools' budget deficits and surpluses well. It has improved from having the highest school reserves in 2009-2010 to around the average for Wales in 2010-2011.

There is not a clear understanding of whether services within 'Fframwaith' have provided value for money, because evaluation is not effective enough. All 'Fframwaith' commissioning arrangements now require a value for money assessment.

Overall, given the outcomes achieved, value for money is adequate.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

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