

Local Government Education Services

Providers

22

Number of providers 2024

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: 4

Welsh-medium: 1

English-medium: 3

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 4

Published to website: 2

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2023
Authorities causing significant concern: 1
No. removed 2023-2024: 0
No. went into follow-up 2023-2024: 0
Total in follow-up in August 2024: 1

Local government education services include those provided or commissioned by a single local authority in addition to those provided in partnership with other local authorities. For example, during this year, some local authorities commissioned school improvement services through regional consortia. The model for providing school improvement varies across Wales and is in a period of transition due to an ongoing review of roles and responsibilities of education partners and delivery of school improvement arrangements.

In addition to our core inspections and follow-up work, local authority link inspectors carried out visits to each local authority over the course of the year to discuss their services. These discussions on specific topics contributed to our thematic reports on additional learning needs (ALN) and early years (EY) provision. During 2023-2024, we piloted enhanced local authority link inspector visits where a small team of inspectors visited a local authority to look at specific aspects of their work in more depth.

Summary

Where local authorities support schools effectively, they use a wide range of information to identify schools that require support and effectively quality assure the work of school improvement officers and partners. Leaders share a strong sense of moral purpose and ensure staff work collaboratively to achieve their priorities.

Annual Risk and Assurance Workshops

As a part of our ongoing link inspector work with local government education services, we contributed to annual risk and assurance workshops alongside Audit Wales and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). Based on this work, we wrote to each local authority, outlining the risks and assurances that we identified.

Key assurances

In many local authorities we identified that inspection outcomes were generally positive, especially in primary schools and non-maintained nursery settings. In a majority of local authorities, we highlighted assurances relating to strong leadership from senior officers and elected members. In these cases, leaders had a clear vision and well-defined roles and responsibilities, which promoted accountability across services. In a minority of local authorities, we noted strengths in how local government education services were working with other directorates within their local authority and the positive impact this was having on the quality of the provision for children and young people.

Key risks

Many local authorities expressed concern about decreasing budgets at a time where there were increasing demands on services, particularly in relation to support for children's and young people's well-being. Attendance was a key risk for local authority education services as this remained significantly below pre-pandemic levels in nearly all local authorities across Wales. We highlighted concerns around learner behaviour and the increase in fixed-term and permanent exclusions in around half of local authorities. We also identified risks related to inspection outcomes, particularly where schools had been in a statutory category for a prolonged period. The recruitment and retention of staff and leaders was also a key risk, and we highlighted this in a few authorities, particularly in Welsh-medium settings.

Joint inspections of child protection arrangements (JICPA)

During 2023-2024, we continued to work alongside Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to undertake joint inspections of child protection arrangements (JICPA) in Powys and Cardiff local authorities. Our role is to evaluate a local authority's safeguarding and child protection arrangements from an education perspective.

In both authorities inspected, safeguarding was central to the work of leaders and officers within the education directorate. Officers provided strong and effective leadership to ensure that safeguarding was regarded as everyone's responsibility. In both authorities, school and PRU leaders were confident in the safeguarding support and guidance that they received. Staff knew pupils and their families well. There were strong working practices where providers and other agencies such as health and children's services worked effectively in partnership to plan, implement, and review provision for vulnerable children. Pupils received appropriate support within each provider with a comprehensive range of programmes used to promote health and well-being. In both authorities, officers' role in evaluating providers' safeguarding practices through the use of audits was at an early stage of development and needed strengthening.

Inspections

Between September 2023 and July 2024, we completed four inspections of local government education services. The inspection of the Vale of Glamorgan Council was conducted as a pilot for our Inspection 2024 arrangements. All four authorities were asked to produce case studies. Conwy highlighted their [support for vulnerable young people through integrated service working](#). The Vale of Glamorgan prepared a case study on [the impact of cross-directorate working on education services](#). We requested a case study on Ceredigion's work to develop Welsh language provision. [Caerphilly's inspection report](#) includes a case study on supporting learners with ALN in mainstream providers.

Outcomes and education services

Inspections of local authority education services include local inspection questions (LIQs), which focus on specific aspects of the provision. Local inspection questions in 2023-2024 focused on areas such as school improvement, promoting good attendance and behaviour, family engagement, the provision for additional learning needs, alleviating the impact of poverty on educational attainment, school reorganisation and provision for developing Welsh.

All our inspections considered how well local authorities support schools to improve, focusing on how they support teaching and learning and leadership. In all four inspections, we found that local authority officers had a generally strong understanding of many aspects of their schools' work. Across the four authorities inspected, officers and school improvement partners had developed strong professional relationships with leaders in schools. Officers or partners visited providers regularly to gather information and to support and challenge school leaders. In many instances, officers used local authority data systems to gather a wide range of helpful information, including information about finance, human resources, attendance and school improvement. Local authorities held regular meetings to discuss potential issues and the support individual schools needed to address these aspects of their work. In a few instances, these information gathering systems were in the early stages of development.

In all four inspections, we found that officers worked productively with colleagues in their school improvement services or partnership arrangements. In the best examples, local authorities had clear systems to quality assure the work of school improvement officers or partners to ensure consistency and quality. Overall, we found that officers and partners were working beneficially with schools to support schools' own quality assurance processes, gathering first-hand evidence through work scrutiny, listening to learners, lesson observations and learning walks. Although this work looked helpfully at the quality of teaching and provision, it did not always focus well enough on the progress made by pupils in lessons and over time.

We found that local authorities offer valuable support for leaders including professional learning opportunities such as shadowing experienced leaders, coaching and mentoring. In addition, school governors received a valuable range of guidance and professional learning to help them undertake their responsibilities.

In general, the local authorities inspected made appropriate use of their statutory powers such as issuing warning notices or providing additional governance when schools did not address urgent performance issues quickly enough. Often support around schools in any category of Estyn follow-up was sound, and in most instances led to timely improvements.

In our inspections this year, we found that school improvement services were having a positive impact overall. Inspection outcomes for schools and providers in three of the four authorities inspected were broadly in line with the national average. Notably, over time, inspection outcomes for schools in Ceredigion have been strong, with no providers requiring follow-up activity since we resumed inspection following the COVID-19 pandemic.

All four inspections considered how well the local authority supported attendance, engagement in education or behaviour. Many authorities were regularly collecting attendance and exclusion data for pupils and providing beneficial educational social work support for schools. In Conwy, we found a well-established and effective culture of cross-service working to provide support for families to help children and young people engage with education. This included valuable work with the health service and the youth and employability services within the council. In Ceredigion, the authority used technology innovatively to raise awareness of traumatic childhood experiences that can lead to challenging behaviours. They used data well to identify pupils who needed support and worked well with schools to provide a range of interventions and provision to help pupils. The Vale of Glamorgan had developed a high-quality toolkit in collaboration with schools to support them to increase their rates of attendance. In Caerphilly, we found that the authority had a clear strategy for improving attendance, which was communicated effectively with schools and other stakeholders, such as parents and carers.

Overall, in all authorities inspected, attendance rates had improved during the academic year 2023-2024, although they remained lower than they were before the pandemic, as was the case across Wales. The rates of absence, particularly persistent absence in secondary schools, remained too high. Our inspections found that often interventions to address these shortcomings had not yet had enough impact on improving attendance levels. Two local authorities were given a recommendation to improve attendance. In January 2024, we published a thematic report on [improving attendance in secondary schools](#), which includes recommendations for local authorities.

Overall, we found that the four local authorities inspected were making good progress towards the implementation of the ALN and Education Tribunal Act (Wales) 2018, through professional learning, support and resources for schools. A common feature was the way officers had established productive and supportive relationships with parents and carers. Local authorities provided a wide range of services to support children and young people with ALN, their families, schools and settings. They used a range of models to deliver this support including through special schools and provision located within mainstream settings. Bilingual provision was a strength in both Ceredigion and Conwy. In Caerphilly, the statutory inclusion team and specialist advisory teachers provided invaluable, systematic support to schools and early years settings. Caerphilly, Conwy and the Vale of Glamorgan had helpfully summarised the authority's expectations in developing inclusive school practices for providers.

The effectiveness of quality assurance processes to evaluate strengths and areas of improvement in ALN services and provisions varied across local authorities. In the best examples, officers analysed appropriately the outcomes for pupils with ALN and other data to consider the quality of provision and identify areas for improvement.

Generally, the local authorities inspected were developing their provision well to mitigate the impact of poverty on the well-being of children and young people. However, they did not always consider well enough how they could improve the learning, progress and attainment of pupils living in low-income households.

Collaboration and partnership working to mitigate the impact of poverty on well-being in the Vale of Glamorgan

During its inspection, we found that the Vale of Glamorgan had a strong moral commitment to mitigate the impact of poverty on the well-being of children and young people. The local authority had a secure understanding of the needs of its communities, and officers were responsive to the challenges. Collaboration and partnership working were a key feature of its work and had allowed it to direct its services to where the need was greatest and most urgent. Overall, the impact of its work to reduce the impact of poverty on the well-being of children and young people was strong.

In two local authorities, we focused on their arrangements to develop the Welsh language. In both authorities, leaders had a clear vision and strong commitment towards improving provision for the Welsh language. Officers collaborated effectively across service areas and with external partners to deliver improvements. Staff accessed valuable professional learning opportunities to improve their own Welsh language skills and there was a range of resources to help teachers and pupils develop their skills.

All authorities inspected were developing well the work of language immersion centres to support latecomers¹Latecomers: learners (who are seven years of age or above) who do not speak Welsh but wish to attend Welsh-medium provision to Welsh-medium education. For example, Caerphilly and the Vale of Glamorgan had both recently piloted or established new immersion centres in Welsh-medium schools. In Ceredigion, leaders had acted promptly to plan strategically how they could support providers to move successfully along the language continuum. At the time of the inspection, five schools were changing language category in response to the authority's ambition to ensure that all pupils are able to receive Welsh-medium education in the early years. Read how the local authority was making particularly strong progress towards its Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) here.

Leading and improving

Across all four authorities inspected, leaders had a clear vision for education and a strong sense of moral purpose. They emphasised high aspirations for children and young people within their communities and reflected this clearly in their corporate and financial plans. Local authorities understood well the pressures facing education in terms of finance and were working closely with schools to manage these challenges. Overall, elected members scrutinised the work of education directorates suitably, posing appropriate questions to officers within meetings. In the best examples, they identified pertinent issues to discuss, provided good challenge to the executive and ensured appropriate accountability over time. In one local authority, members of the Youth Council contributed positively to scrutiny meetings and leaders took good account of their views when discussing key issues. In another local authority, senior leaders and elected members had actively encouraged stakeholders to express views on the quality of their work, including children and young people. As a result, their views had influenced the strategic direction of the authority in specific aspects of its work.

At the time of our inspections, we found that all four authorities prioritised safeguarding appropriately, including arranging and facilitating valuable training and guidance for providers.

All four authorities had demonstrated impactful leadership over time, resulting in a track record of improvement. Senior leaders in each authority set high expectations and modelled exemplary professional behaviours. Officers worked strategically to promote collaboration between schools and have developed leadership capacity well across each authority. As a result, across the authorities we inspected, leaders have developed strong professional relationships with staff in schools.

All four local authorities had suitable processes to self-evaluate, monitor and quality assure their provision. However, as in 2022-2023, improvement plans did not consistently set out clear success criteria and officers did not always consider well enough the impact actions had on improving provision and outcomes for children and young people. As a result, officers were not identifying precisely enough areas for further improvement. For example, authorities did not always evaluate the impact of professional learning for staff and schools well enough.

School re-organisation proposals

During 2023-2024, 15 local authorities consulted on a total of 27 proposals for school re-organisation. In a very few cases, local authorities put forward single consultations that proposed changes in multiple providers. Often, these proposals did not provide consultees with enough information about the planned changes. Overall, we concluded that many proposals were likely to enable local authorities to maintain or improve education provision in a particular area. However, in a few instances, proposals did not consider in sufficient detail the impact of changes on pupils' learning or the quality of teaching.

Almost a quarter of proposals consulted on changing the language medium of a provider from English to Welsh to improve provision for the Welsh language. In nearly all cases, these consultations proposed changing the language medium of foundation learning in primary schools. While all proposals considered how these changes could support local authority Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs), they did not always consider the wider impact of the proposed changes on the school.

Around a quarter of proposals consulted on the closure of a school. In a minority of these cases, the local authority included detail around how it would accommodate pupils from these schools, for example by increasing the capacity of a neighbouring school.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 - 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected four Local Authorities.

All four were given a recommendation to improve or refine their self-evaluation and improvement planning, with a focus for three on them on learner outcomes.

Two were given a recommendation to improve attendance in the authorities' schools, and one to support schools to reduce rates of exclusions.