

Local government education services (LGES)

Providers

22

Number of providers in 2025

Core inspections and enhanced Local Authority Link Inspector visits (ELVs)

3

Number of core inspections

3

Number of ELVs

No. in follow-up September 2024

Authorities causing significant concern: **1**

No. removed 2024-2025: **1**

No. went into follow-up 2024-2025: **1**

Total in follow-up in August 2025:
1

Summary

The effectiveness of school improvement services varied considerably across the local authorities inspected this year. Where school improvement processes were at their strongest, officers gathered a range of first-hand evidence to inform evaluation and support and fostered positive working relationships with leaders in schools and settings. In the weaker examples, leaders and officers often relied too heavily on informal approaches to share information and did not monitor and challenge schools to make improvements well enough. These local authorities did not focus well enough on improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in secondary schools.

Local authorities had seen an increase in demand for specialist additional learning needs (ALN)

provision following the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of the three local authorities inspected had responded successfully to the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. Progress was slower in one local authority due to changes in leadership. Tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment remained a priority, with local authorities promoting equity through professional learning, multi-agency collaboration, and targeted interventions. In two local authorities, leaders focused strongly on promoting bilingualism and promoting the Welsh language supported by ambitious Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs). The development of pupils' Welsh-language skills in English-medium schools was an area for further development.

Financial pressures were evident across all authorities. In the best examples, education finance teams offered valuable support to schools in managing budgets. In two local authorities, we found that decisions had not fully mitigated the ongoing fiscal challenges facing schools and directorates.

Where leadership was at its strongest, leaders had an ambitious vision for education and took a strategic approach to drive improvements. Where leadership was weaker, scrutiny and accountability mechanisms lacked rigour. Safeguarding practices were generally sound, although isolated issues such as school site security issues required attention.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning continued to be areas requiring development, with authorities not always identifying or addressing areas for improvement with enough precision. A number of school reorganisation proposals were reviewed, primarily focusing on consolidating provision and expanding specialist support. The most common recommendations across the inspections related to enhancing leadership, improving school improvement processes, strengthening financial oversight, and refining self-evaluation and planning practices.

School improvement

The model for providing school improvement services varies across Wales and continues to be in a period of transition due to a review of the roles and responsibilities of education partners and arrangements. Across the three authorities inspected, leaders had prioritised the need to develop positive working relationships with leaders in schools and settings. Officers in Newport and Neath Port Talbot had developed effective collaborative approaches, which had fostered high levels of mutual respect and trust with school leaders. We found that officers or partners regularly visited schools to gather information and offer support. In the best examples, they gathered a range of evidence such as data around attendance and exclusions and first-hand evidence from schools and settings to help them understand strengths and areas for improvement. These local authorities used structured approaches to share intelligence, triangulate findings and agree next steps. For example, Newport used a helpful targeted 'Team around the School' approach. However, this wasn't always the case across the authorities inspected. Where leaders and officers did not use first-hand evidence well enough or where they depended too much on informal approaches to share information, their ability to monitor and challenge progress and ensure that schools were making improvements in a timely manner was limited. In these instances, officers often did not focus well enough on the impact of provision on pupils' learning or well-being.

Where school improvement processes were stronger, local authorities had helpful processes to identify and share effective practice across schools. This helped authorities to create a strong sense of collaborative leadership across schools. In addition, some local authorities had established valuable support programmes for new headteachers. School staff in these authorities had access to a wide range of professional learning opportunities, which were often tailored to the needs of individual

schools. However, where school improvement was weaker, the support on offer did not always focus well enough on improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in secondary schools.

In 2024-2025, the effectiveness of school improvement services varied considerably across the local authorities inspected. Inspection outcomes for schools and providers in two of the three authorities inspected were broadly in line with what was seen nationally, whilst the proportion of schools placed into follow-up in one local authority was significantly greater. In this authority, the quality and the impact of school improvement work were not effective enough.

Additional learning needs

All three inspections included a local inspection question focused on provision for additional learning needs (ALN). Following the pandemic, local authorities have seen an increase in demand for specialist provision. We found that two of the three local authorities inspected had responded successfully to implementing their statutory duties in response to the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. In one local authority, progress had been slower due to a lack of continuity in leadership. This inconsistency in progress was also found in our [thematic report on the ALN system](#). In that report, we found that the work of the new Early Years ALN Lead Officers was having a positive impact on provision, but that provision of equitable Welsh-medium support remained underdeveloped.

Where practice was at its strongest, leaders showed a passion and commitment to promote inclusive practice within the local authority. They had taken a methodical and supportive approach to the development of provision for learners with ALN. This had helped them develop a wide range of valuable services to support children and young people, their families, schools and settings. Both Newport and Neath Port Talbot provided beneficial advice, support and guidance about ALN to schools and settings. Officers had worked closely with providers to support the delivery of a wide range of valuable services, often focused on building capacity. For example, in Newport, leaders had made effective use of special schools to develop specialist strategies in mainstream schools and local authority specialist classes. In the local authorities inspected, officers often worked closely and productively with a range of key partners. However, our reports on [Jobs Growth Wales+](#) and [independent living skills programmes](#) in colleges identified that joint planning and information sharing with local authorities to support transition for learners with ALN were too variable.

Multi-agency working to support the development of Welsh-medium ALN support in Neath Port Talbot

The authority's dedicated Welsh-medium ALN steering group, Datblygu Addysg Cynhwysol Cymraeg, ensures effective and equitable access to support for learners. This multi-agency group includes educational psychologists, improvement officers, specialist teachers, and school leaders. The group develops and shares a range of valuable bilingual resources and provides effective professional learning opportunities, which also supports the aims of the authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan to promote the Welsh language.

Mitigating the impact of poverty on educational attainment

All three authorities showed strong ambition to ensure equity for children and young people, including those impacted by poverty. Officers often collaborated beneficially with other service areas and external organisations to mitigate the impact of poverty for families. For example, in Powys the Child Poverty Task Force facilitates a range of helpful projects. In Neath Port Talbot, officers have worked to deliver professional learning to all school staff to support their school to become 'poverty savvy'. This has helped to dismantle barriers to pupils' learning and has supported a notable reduction in exclusions and an improvement in attendance for pupils who are eligible for free school meals. Our thematic report on the [impact of poverty on educational attainment in early education](#) noted variation in how early education was accessed across Wales due to how local authorities provided nursery education. Variance in funding and the provision of professional learning across the non-maintained sectors were also key considerations.

Welsh-medium education

In two local authorities, leaders placed a strong focus on developing the Welsh language and promoting bilingualism, supported by ambitious Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs). In these authorities, officers communicated their vision proactively and identified geographical areas to further promote and establish Welsh-medium provision from the early years onwards. All three local authorities were successfully developing provision for late immersion¹ Late immersion: provision for learners who join Welsh-medium schools or Welsh streams in bilingual schools. These learners can be complete newcomers to the Welsh language or re-engaging with Welsh-medium provision. Late immersion provision often involves an intensive and structured programme which allows learners to eventually join mainstream Welsh-medium provision. to increase the opportunities for pupils to transfer to Welsh-medium schools or streams. The development of pupils' Welsh-language skills in English-medium schools was often at an earlier stage, which led to a recommendation in one local authority.

Other local inspection questions

Some local inspection questions were unique to particular authorities. [Newport](#) had a local inspection question on how well it supported the learning and well-being of ethnic minority learners and learners whose first spoken language was not English or Welsh. The local authority hosts the Gwent Education Multilingual Service, a regional service that provided helpful support and guidance to schools. In addition, the local authority had recently provided a valuable toolkit to help school evaluate their provision for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds.

[Powys](#) had questions on how well the school transformation agenda ensured that there is appropriate provision for all learners, including those in Welsh-medium education and in post-16 and how it supported and challenged its schools to make the most effective use of their resources. The local authority's progress in addressing Welsh-medium transformation has had a positive impact on enabling pupils to access secondary education in the north of the local authority. Progress to address post-16 transformation was too slow. The local authority had not had enough impact in supporting sustainable budget positions in schools over time.

Leading and improving

During 2024-2025, findings for inspection area 2, leading and improving, were variable. Where leadership was at its strongest, leaders had an ambitious vision for education and took a clear, strategic and measured approach to driving improvements in the support and challenge offered to schools and settings. They modelled exemplary professional behaviours and developed strong working relationships with key partners such as headteachers, chairs of governing bodies and school improvement partners. In these instances, leadership had impacted positively on improving outcomes for children and young people. However, in some cases, leadership had not had enough impact on securing important improvements in education services over time. This is due to a range of factors including a need to increase leadership capacity and a lack of a sustained focus on education in corporate plans.

In two of the three local authorities inspected in 2024-2025, education featured as a central priority within their corporate plans and was underpinned appropriately by the Well-being of Future Generations Act and national priorities. Leaders emphasised high aspirations for children and young people and demonstrated a strong commitment to offering them the best start in life. Across all three authorities, leaders were working purposefully with elected members to develop an understanding of the work of the education directorate. However, issues such the quality of reports from officers and limited opportunities for education to feature on forward work plans had hampered the effectiveness of scrutiny in the local authorities inspected. Scrutiny committees did not always question and challenge the cabinet members with responsibility for education well enough.

The establishment and development of a culture of collaboration and partnership working with schools and external agencies was a key feature in all three local authorities. In two authorities, these positive relationships had been sustained over an extended period of time and had led to a palpable sense of teamwork. Officers offered helpful practical support for schools, which was highly valued by school staff.

In general, local authorities recognised the financial pressures facing schools, including their worsening overall reserve position. In the best examples, education finance teams offered schools valuable training and structured support to help them manage their budgets effectively. For example, in Newport, the education finance team offered support and challenge around both high surpluses and potential deficits through a service level agreement. In two of the three inspections, we found that strategic decisions had not fully mitigated against the increasing financial challenges facing directorates and schools, for example when local authorities made substantial revisions to financial formulas or when driving the pace of change in areas such as ALN and post-16 transformation.

Effective support to help schools manage budgets in Newport

The education finance team works intensively with schools to address potential deficit budgets. Where schools apply for a licenced deficit, this is only authorised if officers assess that the associated deficit recovery plan is both appropriate and achievable. For these schools, the local authority requires full governing body attendance at a training session with officers to set out the implications of being in deficit. Officers meet regularly with schools to monitor progress against deficit recovery plans. Five schools ended the last financial year with a deficit and only one school was unable to set a balanced budget for the current financial year. The investment in the capacity of the education finance team and the diligent work of officers mean that this is a more positive picture than was the case a few years ago.

At the time of our inspections, we found that all three local authorities were providing beneficial support for schools and providers around safeguarding. This included the provision of helpful guidance, policies and relevant up-to-date training for safeguarding and child protection. Authorities also visited schools regularly to quality assure their arrangements. In one local authority, we gave a recommendation for the local authority to urgently address school site security issues.

In local government education services inspections, self-evaluation and planning for improvement has been an area for improvement over several years. This continued to be the case this year. Although all three authorities had appropriate processes to support self-evaluation and performance review, these were not always used purposefully enough to support improvement. For example, quality assurance and self-evaluation processes did not always focus well enough on the impact the service's work has had on pupils' outcomes. As a result, leaders and officers did not identify areas that needed improvement precisely enough. Our evaluations of local inspection questions often referred to weaknesses in self-evaluation and planning for improvement within service areas.

In three authorities, we carried out enhanced local authority visits (ELVs) where a small team of inspectors looked at aspects of education services in more depth to support local authorities within their improvement cycle. This year, ELVs focused on how well local authorities were providing support and challenge to improve aspects such as attendance, additional learning needs provision, the curriculum, school modernisation and reorganisation and Welsh-medium provision. A clear ethos of collaborative working was a feature across all three local authorities, whilst how well officers focused on the impact of the service's work on pupils' outcomes was a common area for further development.

Follow-up

In October 2024, Torfaen local authority was removed from the list of authorities causing significant concern. Due to the notable progress they had made since their core inspection, the local authority was asked to produce a case study outlining how leaders had secured improvements.

Summary of sixth form provision in Wales

Between March and October 2025, we engaged with local authorities to gather an overview of the strengths and challenges they face in terms of sixth form provision in schools.

Sixth form provision across Wales presents a mixed picture of innovation and persistent challenges. Many local authorities have embraced collaborative models, such as school clusters and partnerships with further education (FE) colleges, to broaden the curriculum offer locally and sustain subject diversity, especially in areas with small cohorts. Urban authorities like Cardiff and Swansea benefit from economies of scale and shared resources, while rural and bilingual areas often face logistical barriers that hinder collaboration. Hybrid and online learning tools like e-sgol are being used to address gaps, although their use is inconsistent. Welsh-medium provision has seen progress in some areas through strategic partnerships, but generally remains uneven across Wales, with limited subject choice and retention challenges in smaller authorities.

Sustainability of sixth form provision remains a pressing concern for local authorities. Small sixth forms, particularly in rural and bilingual regions, face challenges of financial viability, declining enrolment, and limited subject choice, especially in vocational subjects, modern foreign languages, and music. Retention rates from Year 11 to sixth form are low or variable in many areas, with many learners often opting for FE colleges due to broader vocational pathways and perceived quality. Although some local authorities had established effective oversight networks and quality assurance processes, these remained variable in quality and underdeveloped in others. Overall, Wales's sixth form landscape reflected progress and collaboration but faced enduring pressures around sustainability, equity of access, Welsh-medium continuity, and quality assurance capacity.

School re-organisation proposals

During 2024-2025, we provided responses to 33 re-organisation proposals from 13 local authorities. As with previous years, this does not give a clear picture of the proposed changes to education provision in Wales, as a few local authorities put forward single consultations that proposed changing provision in multiple providers. This made it difficult for statutory consultees, such as parents, to consider the impact of plans on their child's school or setting.

Overview of recommendations

All three providers inspected were given at least one recommendation related to **education services and their impact**. Powys was identified as causing significant concern and required follow-up activity:

- Two local authorities had a recommendation to strengthen the quality of support and challenge to schools to improve outcomes for all learners, including those with ALN, including how information is collected about schools to support this work
- One needed to work with partners to rapidly develop and implement a sustainable model for 16-19 education
- One had a recommendation to strengthen work to develop the Welsh language skills of pupils in English-medium schools

All providers were given at least one recommendation about **leading and improving**:

- Two local authorities needed to strengthen the quality and impact of leadership at all levels, including political leadership
- Two local authorities had a recommendation to sharpen evaluation and improvement processes
- One local authority had to urgently address important school site security issues
- One local authority needed to strategically address the financial challenges facing the directorate and schools