



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE

SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

A report on education services in
Wrexham County Borough Council
The Guildhall
Wrexham
LL11 1AY

Date of inspection: October 2019

by

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

About Wrexham County Borough Council

Wrexham County Borough Council is located in North East Wales and has an estimated population of 136,126. The local authority maintains 68 schools. There are 57 primary schools, including seven that provide Welsh-medium education and 1 federated dual-stream primary school. There are nine secondary schools including one Welsh-medium school. In addition, there is one special school, one maintained nursery and one pupil referral unit.

The chief executive took up his post in 2018 and the Chief Officer for Education and Early Intervention was appointed in 2017. The council leader has been in his role since 2014 and the main portfolio holders for education services took up their positions in 2017. The local authority's last inspection was in November 2010.

Wrexham is one of six local authorities in the GwE Consortium for school improvement.

In 2019-2020, the Council's net education budget is approximately £98.4 million. The delegated school budget per pupil is £4,870 per pupil, which is 10th highest of all local authorities in Wales.

Inspectors take account of a wide range of information about the local population when evaluating outcomes and the quality of education services. They consider this information alongside information about the national population. Some of the most useful information about children and young people in Wrexham is noted below:

- Over a three year average, 17.2% of pupils aged 5 to 15 are eligible for free school meals, slightly lower than the Wales average of 17.8%
- 9.2% of pupils aged 5 and over are fluent in Welsh, which is lower than the Wales average of 16.2%
- 11.8% of pupils aged 5 and over are from ethnic minorities, slightly above the Wales average of 11.4%
- 19.3% of pupils have special educational needs, lower than the Wales average of 22.2%
- 96 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2019, which is slightly lower than the Wales average of 109 children per 10,000

Summary

Overall, pupils make good progress in primary schools but, in a majority of secondary schools, pupils' education outcomes are well below those of their counterparts nationally. Over time, inspection judgements in secondary schools in Wrexham do not compare well with those of secondary schools across Wales.

Recently, senior leaders in Wrexham have articulated a vision for education services that sets out their ambition for all learners. There is a clear political and officer commitment to improve outcomes, and senior leaders have communicated frankly with stakeholders the scale of the challenges facing the local authority, particularly in relation to poor performance in secondary schools.

The local authority's and its partners' current approaches to the challenges are broadly appropriate. The local authority has recently strengthened how it challenges the performance of schools and supports them to improve. Beneficial initiatives have been introduced, such as accelerated improvement boards. The local authority provides a wide and varied range of helpful services that support the education of pupils and young people across pre-school, compulsory school age and to post-sixteen and beyond. Its special educational needs provision meets the needs of pupils well, as do youth support services. These services and approaches focus appropriately on building capacity in schools as well as supporting pupils and young people.

Despite strengths in education services, actions to bring about improvement have had limited impact on the outcomes for secondary pupils. Self-evaluation and improvement processes across important service areas, including those supporting pupils' wellbeing, attendance and behaviour, are underdeveloped. This means that the local authority does not have an accurate understanding of the effectiveness of its approaches. These services do not currently work effectively together to ensure that their work is co-ordinated and coherent, and this has not been identified well enough by senior officers.

The implications of weak outcomes in secondary schools in Wrexham are significant for young people's wellbeing and their future education, training and employment. The legacy of ineffective intervention and support over many years has resulted in only limited improvement in many secondary schools. The scale of the challenge to improve outcomes in secondary schools means that Wrexham is an authority that is causing significant concern.

Recommendations

- R Urgently improve outcomes for learners, particularly at key stage 4
- R2 Improve attendance, wellbeing and behaviour of secondary school pupils
- R3 Strengthen joint working across service areas relating to all aspects of wellbeing
- R4 Improve the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning across all education services

What happens next

The local authority will update its improvement plans to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will review the provider's progress through post-inspection improvement conference and progress conferences. A monitoring visit will take place about 30 months after the publication of this report.

Main findings

Outcomes

Inspection outcomes in Wrexham primary schools and settings indicate that pupils generally make strong progress. However, by the time they leave secondary school, a majority of pupils do not make as much progress as expected. Over time, inspection judgements for standards in secondary schools in Wrexham do not compare well with those of secondary schools across Wales. In a majority of secondary schools, pupils are performing below the average for their counterparts in similar schools. A particular concern is that, across a majority of Wrexham secondary schools, standards in English and mathematics have been poor in recent years. As a result, pupils' choices and opportunities at post-16 are more limited. In the secondary schools where pupils have underperformed over the last three years, only a very few show an improving trend.

Most pupils make good progress in Welsh first language during their time in primary school.

Vulnerable learners, including pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with special educational needs, perform well below the average for their peers across Wales. In addition, the most able pupils in a majority of secondary schools do not make enough progress.

Over the last three years, the proportion of Year 11 leavers known not to be in education, employment or training has remained low and is generally in line with the average for Wales. The work of the youth support services contributes well to supporting pupils' post-16 transition. Nearly all pupils in Wrexham move on to post-16 education, training or employment, with most enrolling at the local further education college. Two secondary schools currently have sixth forms, one English medium and one Welsh medium school. One other school sixth form has recently closed. Post-16 pupils who remain at school make suitable progress.

Outcomes from Estyn inspection reports in non-maintained settings and primary schools show that most pupils' wellbeing in these providers is good. However, the wellbeing and attitudes to learning of pupils in secondary schools do not compare well to those in other schools in Wales.

Young people access a wide range of services provided by the local authority to help with their mental and emotional health. For example, young people obtain helpful support on a range of issues, including housing and sexual health through the 'Infoshop' located in the town centre. The proportion of young people making use of the youth service is higher than that of other local authorities in Wales. An increasing number of young people use these services well to develop their self-esteem and social skills and to gain accredited outcomes. Participation rates in extra-curricular activity such as sport are good.

The local authority engages with young people through the work of its youth council group 'Senedd yr ifanc'. This group has increased engagement by young people in local authority consultations, which has helped to inform improvement planning for

aspects such as wellbeing. These young people provide training for elected members and challenge local authority officers well on aspects such as exclusions and curriculum offers in schools.

Overall, pupils' attendance in primary schools is satisfactory. However, pupils' attendance in secondary schools has remained below expectations in a majority of schools for the last four years. Attendance of all groups of learners is below expectations. A very few primary and a third of secondary schools have seen an increase in persistent absence during the last two years.

The rate of both permanent exclusions and fixed-term exclusions remains too high. Fixed-term exclusions show an increasing trend over the past three years. Since 2017, the rate of fixed-term exclusions over five days is the highest in Wales.

Education services

Under Inspection Area 2, Estyn sets local inspection questions that are relevant to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's current strategic priorities or result from information that Estyn has about education services in the local authority.

How well does the local authority support schools to improve, particularly secondary schools?

Since the appointment of a new chief education officer in 2017, relationships between the local authority, its schools and the regional consortium have improved. As a result, there is a higher degree of challenge, professional dialogue and increased accountability. The local authority now knows its schools better and is developing the ability to identify strengths and areas for improvement beyond more superficial aspects of a school's work.

Plans for school improvement generally capture key priorities for development well. During the last six months, plans for secondary schools have been sharper and more comprehensive. Officers liaise with the consortium to monitor these plans regularly and remedial actions are noted where there are concerns about progress. However, the evaluation of the impact of school improvement strategies in a minority of important areas is not developed well enough. Evaluations tend to capture actions completed rather than the impact on agreed priorities.

The local authority, in collaboration with the consortium, draws up bespoke support plans for all secondary schools, and primary schools where a more nuanced approach to support is appropriate. The local authority has established suitable structures to monitor these plans regularly and to challenge schools and the consortium in terms of the progress made and the appropriateness of support. Where a school is in need of a higher level of support, an accelerated improvement board (AIB) is convened. The AIBs, with membership including the chief education officer and lead member for education, hold all stakeholders to account well and support beneficially the drive for improvement in the school. This is a strength of the local authority's work.

Local authority and school improvement officers work well in partnership to design a range of packages to support schools with many of the areas requiring improvement. This support skilfully aligns regional improvement initiatives with specific approaches tailored to the school's priorities for improvement. However, the local authority does not integrate its plans to improve attendance, behaviour and other aspects of wellbeing well enough into the bespoke support to maximise the impact of improvement strategies.

Support improvement advisers (SIA) currently working with schools have the experience and skills to support leaders and teachers. They are deployed appropriately and their skill sets are matched to the needs of individual schools. SIA reports capture key matters suitably and provide clear next steps for improvement. Schools in need of support have access to regular, extensive and valuable interventions. However, it is too early to see the full impact of this work.

How well does the local authority work with schools to improve attendance?

In a majority of Wrexham secondary schools, attendance levels are below those of similar schools across Wales and, in a couple of schools, attendance levels are significantly below those of similar schools. The local authority understands the main challenges facing these schools and has reviewed its approach to supporting schools and individual families. In the main, there are improved links between the education support services and other services and agencies. However, the overarching strategy to guide this work is underdeveloped and, as a result, there is a lack of coherence between plans to improve attendance and the work of other services which support them.

Where officers do work well across agencies to support attendance, their work contributes to improving pupils' attendance. An example is the recent restructuring of the support for schools, which has had early benefits. The more targeted approach to supporting schools is sensible and there are examples of good cooperation with agencies involved in supporting attendance, mainly through information sharing.

The local authority has also made progress in reviewing how it supports individuals who are persistently absent from schools and how to promote good attendance overall in the schools where low attendance is an issue. This has resulted in bespoke approaches to raising attendance levels. In one school, the local authority identified one-day exclusions as a significant contributor to poor attendance levels and worked with the school to develop restorative practices to support these pupils.

Education social workers work well with schools to apply fixed penalty notices robustly following a clear and transparent procedure. In addition, they have been successful in taking court action when families do not respond to a penalty or warning regarding their child's attendance. In a few of these cases, individual pupils' attendance has improved, but this work has had little effect on improving overall attendance, especially in secondary schools.

Although these developments are having some impact, there is still a lack of focus on addressing persistent absences in general. In addition, officers involved in supporting schools lack clarity around which approaches to support schools work well and which do not. This limits their understanding of what strategies to adopt in different circumstances. Senior officers' oversight of this work and their understanding of how well officers are engaging and implementing the approaches

on the ground are underdeveloped. Consequently they are not able to hold middle-tier officers to account for their work sufficiently well.

How well does the local authority support learners and schools in order to reduce exclusion?

The local authority has very recently shared updated advice to schools on how they should support learners and reduce exclusions. It has provided a suite of guidance documents and clarified its referral processes. These remind schools of the need to provide a graduated, whole school and inclusive approach in meeting the needs of pupils and reducing exclusions. Despite these developments, the overall understanding that key local authority officers have of the authority's behaviour policy is limited. This is restricting the local authority's capacity to implement and monitor the effectiveness of the policy and approaches.

Primary schools value the behaviour support service provided for them by the local authority. However, the support for secondary schools to reduce exclusions is underdeveloped. All permanent exclusions and four-fifths of fixed-term exclusions are made by secondary schools. In addition, over half of all fixed-term exclusions are for pupils with special educational needs.

The local authority has provided specialist training on behaviour management for secondary schools but this has had little impact on reducing longer fixed-term exclusions. The local authority has provided some challenge to schools on how they code behaviours that lead to exclusions. However, the local authority does not have a detailed enough understanding for the reasons for exclusions to help inform future strategy.

There has been a significant increase in the number of pupils attending education other than at school settings (EOTAS) provision over the past three years. As a result, the pupil referral service has been re-configured to meet increasing demand. Currently, all pupils that attend EOTAS have been identified as having a special educational need and around a fifth have statements of special educational needs.

There are clear protocols for the use of managed moves and pastoral support plans. However, the local authority's oversight of how schools use managed moves is limited and therefore it cannot support both pupils and schools in this process well enough. The local authority is beginning to track the use of pastoral support plans. However, the local authority does not have a strong enough oversight of the use of reduced timetables across schools.

The arrangements for securing appropriate education for permanently excluded pupils do not always meet Welsh Government guidance. Too many permanently excluded pupils are placed in the pupil referral service for extended periods of time and do not get the opportunity to attend a different mainstream school. In addition, last year, just over a third of permanently excluded pupils were out of any form of education for longer than the Welsh Government guidance advocates. This increases the vulnerability of those pupils who are not in school and not receiving alternative education. Overall, the oversight of pupils who are not in school is not robust enough.

How effective are education services for pupils with additional learning needs?

The local authority provides a wide and varied range of services that support pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and those who require extra support well.

These services focus appropriately on building capacity in schools and supporting pupils. The local authority has well-understood procedures for statutory assessment and criteria for accessing specialist provision.

Local authority and school staff benefit from the appropriate links that the local authority has with partner agencies. This is helping staff to develop their own understanding of the needs of pupils and how they can strengthen their support for these pupils.

Joint working helps to ensure that there is coherence in service provision at an operational level and that children and young people receive a co-ordinated input that is relevant to them. For example, joint working with the local health board means that children with speech and language difficulties and those with a visual or hearing impairment are able to access specialist advice, support and guidance.

Just under a fifth of primary and all secondary schools in Wrexham host a local authority resource base provision for pupils with a special educational need, including pupils with autism and speech and language difficulties. The local authority uses information on the changing profile of SEN effectively to amend the number of places available and re-classify provision to meet need. For example, it has created additional provision for pupils with autism and those pupils requiring nurture. Where the need for this specialist provision is identified, the local authority makes timely provision.

The local authority recently commissioned a review of SEN processes in its schools. Just over half of schools review their SEN policy regularly. This has helped to identify strengths and areas for development and the local authority is beginning to act on these findings.

Local authority officers meet leaders in schools annually to monitor the progress being made and the provision for pupils' special educational needs. Local authority officers provide valuable advice and guidance to schools. However, these visits do not focus as well as they could on wider wellbeing considerations such as attendance and behaviour, or consider the high proportion of fixed-term exclusions for pupils with SEN.

In supporting children of asylum-seeking parents, the local authority liaises closely with colleagues in health, housing and the third sector. This approach helps to ensure that pupils are placed promptly in appropriate education.

Local authority officers work with the regional consortium to develop schools' knowledge and understanding of attachment difficulties that pupils may have. As a result, schools are better informed on the impact of adverse childhood experiences.

The service that supports pupils from the gypsy and traveller community ensures that all pupils are integrated into schools well. The local authority has recently secured external funding to establish a base in the traveller community. The base will provide support for the early years and help children with their homework.

The local authority, its officers and schools are working well with colleagues across the region to prepare for the statutory reform of additional learning needs. School

staff working in clusters have identified joint priorities. These range from improving the awareness of parents of the reforms to supporting staff to understand how they may adapt resources and approaches to meet the needs of children.

As part of its preparations around ALN reform, the local authority has engaged with its local prison. It has provided very useful information to both leaders and young prisoners around the reform and what this might mean for prisoners with additional learning needs on their release from prison.

The local authority ensures that parents have access to a range of useful information and services. Local authority officers are assigned to the families of learners with SEN. They remain the main contact for the family and support them well. As a result, officers develop highly effective relationships with parents. The local authority website provides an overview of services that parents can access, including their rights in relation to appeal and dispute resolution. Children too are provided with information on their rights to appeal. Due to the strength of links between the local authority, other agencies and parents, the number of appeals registered with the Special Education Needs Tribunal Wales is historically very low.

How well does the local authority work with schools and external partners to ensure that there are appropriate education and training opportunities for all post-16 learners?

The local authority demonstrates a strong commitment to preparing its pupils for the most relevant post-16 education, employment or training opportunities. Through a range of well-established partnerships including with the Department for Work and Pensions and Careers Wales, it ensures that all learners have access to helpful advice and guidance when considering their options. Joint planning with the local further education college and maintained special school allows nearly a third of learners in key stage 4 to access valuable enrichment and engagement experiences. This comprehensive range of vocational programmes enables pupils, including those with SEN or who require extra support, to prepare purposefully for the transition to post-16 programmes, as well as raising aspirations and successfully preventing young people becoming NEET. These opportunities are designed with care to meet future employment and economic development needs in Wrexham.

Pupils in Wrexham can progress to level 2 and level 3 post-16 programmes in the local further education college or in an English-medium or Welsh-medium school sixth form. Officers and elected members in the local authority seek regular reassurance from these providers about the range and suitability of the offer as well as considering outcomes for all post-16 learners in Wrexham.

Leadership and management

Over a number of years, the local authority has not secured the improvement needed within its education services. Overall, action to bring about change has been too slow.

The recent changes in senior leadership within the local authority has shown an acknowledgement that the local authority needs to improve important aspects of its work. The leader of the council and chief executive have a clear and ambitious vision for education provision and outcomes for children and young people. The

leader of the council, the lead member for education and the lead member for people, youth services and anti-poverty along with senior leaders know the challenges facing the authority well. They have an improving understanding of the key issues facing the education service and individual schools, and know that the pace of improvement has not met their aspirations, especially in relation to secondary school performance.

The local authority's relationship with schools is now more collaborative and has significantly improved over the last two years. The chief education officer has developed a more positive, transparent and challenging working relationship across the local authority education services teams, its schools and elected members. The chief education officer and the lead member for education have engaged well with headteachers and undertaken an extensive programme of school visits, which has helped identify key issues for the local authority. A strength in the leadership is the further development of the local authority's approach to supporting and challenging schools causing concern through the refined accelerated improvement boards.

Over time, the local authority has secured improvements in services and outcomes in some areas but has had limited impact on others. Leaders of education services have strengthened their ability to support and challenge schools to improve. The support that young people receive through the youth service is a strong aspect of the authority's work. However, it has not had enough impact on developing key strategies to improve outcomes, wellbeing, attendance and behaviour in secondary schools or reduce exclusions. Leaders work well with partners and other organisations to deliver improvements to services such as provision for pupils with SEN. However, the ongoing evaluation of the impact of front line services and important improvement initiatives such as the AIBs and actions to address attendance and exclusions is underdeveloped. Furthermore, not all service level teams understand how their work feeds into higher-level plans or how they should work jointly across other departments and the regional school improvement service.

The Council plan sets out a clear commitment to improving education, with one of its main objectives being to 'support people to have positive aspirations, learn and achieve their potential'. The plan is reviewed annually, and in late 2018 elected members considered that the plan had become too broad for the resources available to the authority. From this, the authority developed a smaller, more focused set of in-year priorities, including the need to 'improve secondary education'.

Both the self-evaluation approach and the planning framework provide useful tools to help the authority identify where it wants to go and how well it is progressing. However, the authority does not make best use of these tools because the actions and objectives in plans and performance measures in self-evaluation are not always specific enough, and success criteria are often not challenging enough. In addition, arrangements to secure improvement are underdeveloped across important service areas, including those supporting pupils' wellbeing, attendance and behaviour.

The local authority's self-evaluation cycle is informed well by contributions from partners, including its schools. The authority communicates well with its key stakeholders, including headteachers, elected members and young people, and takes good account of their views. The authority's participation strategy enables children and young people to influence important issues and decisions effectively through, for example, the work of the Senedd yr Ifanc.

Governance arrangements are sound overall. The lifelong learning scrutiny committee meets regularly, with good attendance from elected members. It has in place an appropriate forward work programme, which is updated regularly. The committee considers a wide range of information, including important national and local issues. The quality of information presented to scrutiny is comprehensive, supported by the Council's arrangements for monitoring report quality. Scrutiny members have deepened their knowledge and understanding of school practice and performance effectively through their work with GwE officers. This has enabled them to challenge schools appropriately, for example through the school performance monitoring working group.

The authority's Welsh in education strategic plan is generally fit for purpose. The local authority is appropriately revising aspects of the plan to take account of the increasing demand for Welsh-medium education.

Senior leaders use the corporate framework for staff performance management effectively across the education department. A robust appraisal process identifies professional learning opportunities for all staff. These align closely to objectives within the relevant business plans and there are clear policies to address underperformance. Officers demonstrate a strong commitment to their own professional learning and they attend a range of activities that support their role and their wider career development, such as the opportunity to take a variety of suitable leadership courses for current and future leaders.

The local authority has an appropriate range of guidance with clear policies and procedures to support schools and other education providers to discharge their safeguarding responsibilities. Headteachers and designated safeguarding leads in schools and managers of other education services are supported well by appropriate training, and through advice and guidance as required on a case by case basis.

The local authority has clear guidance and procedures for supporting providers such as schools and youth service provision to manage their duties around safer recruitment. The local authority monitors this well for paid staff, and has recently put in place appropriate audit procedures to ensure that this is also done for all volunteers.

The local authority's allocation of resources to its education services and schools reflects the high priority given to education in the corporate plan. The authority has shown its commitment through taking decisions to protect education budgets wherever possible at a time of budget reductions across other services.

The schools and authority work well together to understand the financial pressures that they face in the short and medium term. Schools highly value the support that is available to help them manage their budgets. The authority has a well-structured approach to setting school budgets, including a comprehensive, staged challenge and intervention process for those schools that have a budget deficit. The authority and schools have a shared understanding of the reasons for these deficits and work together to address these, including consideration of improvement to the school estate.

The authority has a suitable and transparent funding formula, which takes account of the relevant factors for schools. The authority reviewed and updated the funding formula in 2017 and keeps this under review.

The authority has effective arrangements to report progress against its budget spend and uses its forecasting, monitoring and reporting system to ensure consistent budgetary control across the education service and schools.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- consult the local authority on the local inspection questions to be used during the inspection, based on the authority's self-evaluation, strategic plans and relevant data held by Estyn
- analyse the outcomes from open questionnaires, including the views of learners, parents, school staff and governors, local authority staff, regional consortium staff, elected members and general public
- carry out a preliminary visit to the local authority to meet with a range of relevant partners to education services, such as learner representatives, headteachers and governors, and leaders from statutory and third sector agencies working with children and young people

During the inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet with the leader of the council, elected members responsible for education services, elected members responsible for the scrutiny of education services, the chief executive, the director of education, other leaders and managers in education services, other relevant staff in the local authority, the managing director of the regional consortium for school improvement and other relevant staff from the regional consortium
- look closely at the local authority's self-evaluation processes
- consider the local authority's strategic and operational plans for improvement
- scrutinise a variety of documents, including information on learner outcomes, information on the performance of schools and other education settings, including information from the regional consortium for school improvement, minutes from a range of meetings, reports presented to council or scrutiny, information relating to the safeguarding of learners and any other information relevant to the local authority's education services held by Estyn

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection
- provide a draft copy of the report for the local authority to note any concerns with factual accuracy, and made amendments where necessary

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the local authority and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

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.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court, Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

This and other Estyn publications are available on our website: www.estyn.gov.wales

© Crown Copyright 2019: This report may be re used free of charge in any format or medium provided that it is re used accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the report specified.

Publication date: 20/12/2019