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Dear Dr Orders

Estyn Monitoring Visit 25 – 29 January 2016

Following the outcome of the Estyn monitoring visit of education services for children and young people in February 2014, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was of the opinion that the local authority was in need of significant improvement.

A plan of follow-up visits was agreed and teams of inspectors undertook monitoring visits in March and October 2015. The third and final monitoring visit took place from 25 to 29 January 2016. Huw Davies HMI led a team of five inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against all of the six recommendations arising from the monitoring visit in February 2014.

The inspection team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers and partnership representatives. Inspectors scrutinised documentation from the local authority, including evidence on the progress made against each of the recommendations. They also considered outcomes from Estyn inspections of schools in the authority.

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to the leader of the council, cabinet member for education, chair of the scrutiny committee, chief executive, director for education and a representative from the Welsh Government. This letter records the outcomes of that visit.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Cardiff Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations that arose from the monitoring visit in February 2014. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority is no longer in need of significant improvement and is removing it from follow-up activity.

Background

The monitoring visit in February 2014 noted that there had been significant turnover in senior management posts, with periods where key posts were unfilled.

The director for education and lifelong learning had been in post for five months. He had clarified the relationship between the authority and its schools and had taken action to challenge schools more robustly.

Since then there has been a period of stability and the local authority has strengthened its education service. The director has re-structured the department and is now supported by new posts including an assistant director, a head of achievement and inclusion and a head of school organisation, access and planning.

The chief executive continues to have a sound understanding of the areas for improvement in Cardiff's education services for children and young people. He plays a pivotal role in both supporting and challenging the education directorate.

Recommendation 1: Raise standards, particularly at key stage 4

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

Since the monitoring visit in 2014, performance has improved across the key stages in most of the main indicators.

Over the past three years, performance has improved in both the Foundation Phase Indicator and the core subject Indicator at key stage 2. Performance in these indicators has improved at a faster rate than for Wales as a whole and, in 2015, is above that in similar authorities, and is now broadly in line with the average in Wales.

Performance in the core subject indicator at key stage 3 has gradually improved over the past three years, although at a slower rate than the Wales average. In 2015, performance in this indicator continues to be above that of similar authorities, based on free-school-meal eligibility.

At key stage 4, performance in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics has improved significantly over the past three years. In 2015, performance in this measure exceeded the benchmark for performance set by the Welsh Government for the second year running. Performance in the core subject indicator has also improved well over the past three years.

In the other main indicators at key stage 4, including the wider capped point score and the level 2 threshold, there has been steady progress. However, performance in these measures remains below the Wales average and Cardiff has been amongst the lowest performing authorities for the past three years. The authority has not met the Welsh Government benchmark for the wider capped points score for the last three years. Performance in the level one indicator declined in 2015 and is now one of worst in Wales.

In 2015, performance of schools in Cardiff is too variable across the range of key stage 4 indicators when comparing with that of similar schools across Wales, based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. In the level 2 threshold that includes English or Welsh and mathematics and the core subject indicator, many schools are in the top 50% of schools. However, performance in the other main indicators does not compare favourably to that of similar schools based on free-school-meal eligibility. For example, performance in the wider capped points score, level 2 and level 1 places around two thirds of schools in the lower 50% of similar schools.

More able pupils have performed well over the past three years at key stage 4 and the percentage of pupils achieving the equivalent of five or more A*-A GCSE grades has been consistently higher than the Wales average.

Pupils eligible for free school meals perform well at the Foundation Phase indicator and the core subject indicator at key stages 2 and 3 compared to similar pupils across Wales. At key stage 4, these pupils generally perform well in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics, the core subject indicator and level 2 threshold. However, in 2015, the performance of these pupils declined in the wider capped points score and level 1 and is lower than the Wales average for similar pupils.

In 2015, in all the main indicators at key stage 4 except for level 1, the gap in performance between girls and boys is smaller in Cardiff than the Wales average. This is mainly due to the relatively poor performance of girls. Their performance is lower than the Wales average in most indicators across the key stages. This was identified in the 2012 monitoring visit and continues to impact negatively on outcomes in Cardiff, particularly at key stage 4.

Outcomes for pupils who are educated other than at school (EOTAS) are generally poor. Many pupils supported by the range of EOTAS provisions leave with very few or no recognised qualifications.

Recommendation 2: Reduce exclusions and reduce the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training post-16

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

The local authority has taken strong and timely action to reduce the rate of exclusions from schools.

Overall, fixed-term exclusions in secondary schools continue to fall. However, there remain wide variations in the rate of short-term exclusions between secondary schools.

Many primary schools have no or very few fixed-term exclusions. Where exclusions take place, they are generally due to the serious nature of a small number of incidents that have occurred in a very few primary schools.

The rate of permanent exclusions in Cardiff has historically been low. This remains the case and compares favourably to the situation in other authorities in Wales.

The authority continues to take appropriate actions to both challenge and support schools where the level of exclusion is a concern. For example, the local authority has frequent discussions with school leaders regarding approaches to engage and support pupils.

The local authority has provided additional support and training to the minority of schools where there are concerns around continuing high levels of exclusion. The local authority has supported the implementation of appropriate interventions. As a result, exclusions in many of these schools are beginning to reduce.

Speech and language screening has been introduced for all pupils in the primary phase and is beginning to be introduced at key stage 3. However, screening for speech and language needs is not consistent in secondary schools. Where it has been introduced it has identified that pupils most at risk of exclusion often have speech and language difficulties.

Schools that have successfully implemented restorative approaches (a behaviour management approach to resolving conflict and preventing harm) are sharing their knowledge and experience with targeted schools. Early indications are that these approaches are beginning to have a positive impact in the targeted schools.

As part of its five-step approach to managing exclusions, the local authority has delegated funding to schools to enable them to provide a more appropriate curriculum and support pupils at risk of exclusion. This has helped to reduce overall exclusions in secondary schools.

The majority of secondary schools have implemented the five-step model to managing exclusions appropriately. However, a minority of schools do not implement this approach consistently and their exclusion rates remain high.

Most schools have developed partnerships with local organisations that provide education for pupils away from the school site. However, the level of contact that schools have with these providers is inconsistent. As a result, schools cannot guarantee that the learning experiences are matched well enough to pupils' needs or that they achieve accredited outcomes at a level of which they are capable. The level of information that the authority has on the number of hours' education that pupils receive, pupil outcomes, attendance and possible exclusions from provisions is generally weak and this is unacceptable and needs to improve.

The monitoring visit in October 2015 noted that the role that senior leaders in education had in shaping, understanding and driving the reduction in the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) was unclear and that the local authority had no overarching single NEET strategy. Since then the authority has produced a single strategy for youth engagement and progression. This strategy is in line with the six priority areas outlined in the Welsh Government guidance and outlines broadly the actions that need to be taken.

In 2015, 300 pupils identified as being at risk of becoming NEET were supported over the summer term and through the school holiday. Young people were able to access ongoing support and advice to help them to secure suitable education, employment and training placements. This approach is beginning to have a positive impact. However, unverified data for 2015 indicates that Year 11 NEETs has worsened slightly and that Cardiff remains one of the worst performing authorities in Wales. The variation in NEETs across schools remains too great.

In order to improve destinations for looked-after children the authority has recently implemented a trainee programme. This aims to provide looked-after children with new skills and qualifications. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this scheme on the outcomes and destinations of looked-after children.

All secondary schools now use the vulnerability assessment profile and this has been extended to the pupil referral unit and special schools. The profile assists schools in identifying pupils that are at risk of becoming NEET.

All pupils that are educated other than at school (EOTAS), now access taster courses with local providers and receive information and support in respect of next-step opportunities. This has slightly improved the destinations for this group of learners. However, the overall percentage of pupils that are NEET from the authority's special school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and EOTAS provision is far too high.

In October 2015, we reported that relevant information on school exclusion and NEETs data is provided to the regional consortia's challenge advisers but that not all challenge advisers discuss concerns over exclusions or NEETs with their schools. This aspect of the challenge advisers' work with schools is beginning to improve.

Recommendation 3: Make sure that the arrangements for delivering school improvement services challenge and support all schools effectively, in order to improve standards for learners in all key stages

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

Overall, Cardiff schools are being challenged more rigorously and supported more effectively to improve. There have been improvements in most of the outcome indicators at all key stages, although the performance of a few of Cardiff secondary schools is still a significant concern.

The work of the school improvement service commissioned from the regional consortium is based on clear priorities and a good understanding of Cardiff schools. Since the monitoring visit in 2014, the local authority has worked well with its schools to engage school leaders and to develop a change in culture in which schools are more aware of their responsibility for their own improvement.

The local authority is developing a good understanding of its schools. Communication between the local authority and school leaders is open, honest and productive. An improved use of data allows the authority to track the progress of pupils in schools and across the city, and to identify those pupils who are at risk of

underachieving. Sharing this data across all schools has helped to raise expectations and to develop greater accountability, although there is not enough emphasis on the analysis of the performance of particular groups of pupils, for example girls, and pupils with special educational needs.

There is a strong working relationship between the local authority and the regional consortium. The local authority has moderated the outcomes of categorisation in partnership with the regional consortium, and this has led to a more accurate view of school performance, an improved model of differentiated support and challenge, and earlier intervention in schools causing concern.

The two senior challenge advisers support the work of challenge advisers well. The performance management and quality assurance of the work of challenge advisers is now more systematic, and the authority has taken robust steps to improve practice where underperformance is identified. Senior challenge advisers undertake joint visits with challenge advisers to schools to appraise the quality of challenge advisers' work. There are robust processes to quality assure the reports of challenge advisers, and this has led to an improvement in the consistency and precision of their reports. Processes to validate judgements through the collection of first-hand evidence are improving, and this is beginning to provide the authority with a more accurate evaluation of their schools. Through school improvement meetings, challenge advisers are developing a better understanding of the role that wider services in the local authority play in improving schools.

The local authority has refined its processes for schools causing concern. This allows the local authority to tackle underperformance earlier and more systematically. Local authority officers hold headteachers and chairs of governors to account well for the progress of their school through a programme of half-termly or termly performance review meetings. These meetings focus suitably on pupil outcomes and school leadership. The local authority has very useful mechanisms to raise issues with leaders in the education directorate so that swift action, including the use of statutory powers, may be taken where schools are not making enough progress.

In 2014-2015, the local authority issued five statutory warning notices and eight letters of concern to schools. These letters outlined clearly the expectations for improvement. The local authority has used its powers of intervention in five schools. These strengthened arrangements to identify and intervene in underperforming schools are impacting positively on leadership, standards, and the quality of provision in schools. Outcomes improved in ten out of the fifteen schools that received a warning notice or letter of concern, or where formal intervention actions were taken.

The local authority uses a wide range of approaches to improve its underperforming schools. It is beginning to implement strategies to improve the quality of leadership, provision and teaching and learning more sustainably across these schools. However, support strategies that focus on the performance of pupils are still focused too heavily on Year 11 pupils at risk of not achieving their level 2 qualifications in English or Welsh and in mathematics.

The local authority works productively with its regional consortium to address the specific needs of Cardiff schools, and to promote school-to-school working. A few Cardiff schools are acting as hubs to disseminate good practice and to provide training and networking opportunities across the consortium. School improvement groups (SIGs) of teachers and leaders across the region are working on key improvement issues, and these groups focus well on evaluating their work in terms of outcomes for pupils.

Recently, in schools categorised as being effective, a system of peer review is developing. This process facilitates the sharing of good practice and is developing the skills of the headteachers involved.

The local authority has commissioned the regional consortium to deliver a comprehensive range of leadership development programmes specifically to address leadership issues across its schools. These include training for aspiring leaders, middle leaders, headteachers at various stages of their careers, and development for those leaders who are capable of supporting other headteachers, or leading more than one school. It is too early to judge the impact of these programmes.

Processes for strengthening school governance are developing well. This includes bespoke training for governors of its underperforming schools. The council has revised the process for appointing local authority governors and it has brokered a wide range of partnerships with businesses in the city to identify and deploy governors who are better able to support their schools. In schools where governance is particularly weak, the regional consortium has recruited a number of experienced governors to act as consultant governors to work alongside challenge advisers to support the governing body.

Overall, schools in Cardiff are becoming more resilient and are demonstrating a greater capacity for improvement. Since the monitoring visit in 2014, there has been an increase in the number of higher performing schools and a decrease in the number in need of significant improvement as determined by the national model of school categorisation. However, schools' performance at key stage 4 at level 1 and level 2, and in the capped points score, has not improved sufficiently.

Recommendation 4: Improve the effectiveness of joint planning across the range of partnership working

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

The local authority has worked well with partners to rationalise joint planning for services to children and young people. The structures supporting partnership working have been revised, with further changes underway. The revised structures include management boards, operational committees and joint planning procedures. These arrangements are beginning to improve collaborative working across organisational boundaries, to pool resources and align services more effectively to address the key challenges facing the city.

The Cardiff Partnership Board provides a clear direction for joint planning and working to address children and young people's education and support needs based

on the priorities set out in the single integrated plan 'What Matters'. This plan is used well to inform planning across the various partnership boards.

The Education Development Board and the Vulnerable Children and Families Programme Board are developing clear strategies to address well-understood common priorities. These priorities include improving services to disabled children and vulnerable families, early intervention and prevention work, services to support young people's emotional and mental health, and corporate approaches to safeguarding. An outcome of these strategies is joint working between partnership programmes such as Families First, Flying Start, Communities First and Integrated Family Support, to contribute towards improved attendance, behaviour and attainment of young people in schools. However, the challenge remains to reduce the number of young people not in education or training.

The work of the six neighbourhood partnerships in Cardiff has enhanced the authority's capacity to offer locally-delivered and more efficient, multi-agency services. These neighbourhood partnerships are a key component in identifying vulnerable young people and providing early intervention and prevention services before needs become acute and require more costly interventions from specialist services. An important feature is the improving use of outcomes data to evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery, for example by measuring the increases in school attendance, measuring the reach of support services, and evaluating outcomes for young people who use neighbourhood based services. This approach is helping officers to rationalise and identify gaps in provision and to reduce duplication.

Historically, an important barrier to efficient joint working has been the lack of effective information sharing policies and protocols. The Early Help Strategy has been put in place to address this. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this strategy.

There are much improved links and working relationships between officers and schools which are based on a better understanding of their respective roles, mutual expectations and accountabilities. The local authority consults schools with increasing effectiveness, which has resulted in better engagement between the authority and its schools. Headteachers consider that they are better-informed, engage in constructive dialogue with officers and contribute more directly to identifying the local authority's priorities. There is a strong emphasis and shared commitment to develop the capacity of schools in Cardiff to lead and support their own improvement.

The Education Development Board has developed effective partnership working with higher education institutions, further education institutions and the business and enterprise community. This has helped broaden the curriculum for some secondary school pupils, improve educational and employment opportunities for post-16 students and enhance the capacities of governing bodies.

A particularly valuable initiative of the Safe and Cohesive Community Board has been the partnership with Prevent, a Home Office strategy to prevent people becoming radicalised and drawn into terrorism. As a result, schools have undertaken awareness-raising training. All secondary schools have introduced the 'getting on together' curriculum, which challenges all forms of extremism and helps

to improve community cohesion in the city. This work is helping to inform practice throughout the United Kingdom.

The local authority is currently reorganising its youth work provision, following consultation with young people, neighbourhood boards, and voluntary sector providers in Cardiff. The re-organisation is built around increased partnership work between the local authority and the voluntary sector in order to deliver the Welsh Government's Youth Service Strategy, and its Youth Engagement and Progression Framework. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this reorganisation on youth support services in Cardiff.

Recommendation 5: Improve performance management processes to ensure a consistent approach in delivering objectives

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation

Performance management processes within the local authority have improved. The authority now has a better understanding of its current performance within education services for children and young people and its progress in meeting objectives set out in corporate and directorate plans.

The quarterly performance management process ensures that there is strong challenge to the director's quarterly performance report.

The director of education and lifelong learning provides quarterly reports on performance to the cabinet and scrutiny committee. These reports appropriately show links to corporate and directorate priorities as well as progress against challenges identified in the previous quarter. In addition, they contain clear information on progress against the directorate's delivery plan and include suitable information about the main risks together with appropriate mitigating action.

These reports are presented to the 'Star Chamber' prior to being formally considered by the cabinet and scrutiny committee. The chief executive, the leader of the council, relevant directors, the cabinet member for corporate services and performance and other relevant personnel attend the 'Star Chamber' meetings. During 'Star Chamber' meetings the director is challenged in relation to matters identified in the report and suitable actions are agreed. As a result, quarterly performance reports are more robust and their usefulness has improved.

The quarterly performance reports are also presented to the Cardiff Challenge Forum. This forum was established in partnership with the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association to secure the rapid improvement of selected individual services, including education, and of the Council's overall corporate improvement capability. This forum meets quarterly and provides appropriate challenge and support.

The director's annual report is realistic and accurate in the way it evaluates the performance of schools. It provides a useful commentary on performance and identifies priority areas for further improvement. The appendices present useful and balanced analyses of performance across the authority.

Other reports on performance including the self-evaluation report provide useful details of the different education services including progress against the Estyn quality indicator headings. However, these generally describe the actions undertaken rather than how well those actions have been carried out and their impact. They do not provide sufficient evidence to support assertions. Also, areas for improvement are not clear enough to be able to determine a suitable range of appropriate actions.

In 2014-2015, the authority introduced a revised personal performance and development review (PPDR) process for managing the performance of staff. Nearly all staff have been included in this process. Performance objectives for members of staff in the directorate do not link clearly enough to team, directorate or corporate priorities. Targets set for individuals are not consistently measurable, ambitious enough or appropriate to be able to ensure that performance is assessed robustly.

Recommendation 6: Improve the scrutiny of local authority education services and partnership working

The authority has made satisfactory progress in addressing this recommendation.

The authority has responded well to this recommendation in a timely and appropriate manner. The Council has made changes to the scrutiny committee structure and responsibilities. There are now five scrutiny committees, and each is responsible for the scrutiny of partnership work and its impact, in its respective work programme. The children and young people scrutiny committee's work programme appropriately includes arrangements for the scrutiny of all education services for children and young people. This includes services delivered through community settings and through schools.

The children and young people scrutiny committee is increasingly effective. The committee has agreed a framework to provide its members with structured development and training opportunities. This training has helped scrutiny members to improve their understanding of the issues relating to the achievement and attainment of children and young people, and how to interpret the data sets used by education officers and schools to track outcomes.

The committee has put in place a number of actions to better manage its range of duties and the size of its agenda. These include a programme of pre-meetings and briefings, as well as monitoring panels which look specifically at budget and performance reports. These pre-meetings and panels enable the members to identify clear lines of inquiry for follow-up at committee meetings. These changes have helped the scrutiny committee become more focused.

The committee also makes good use of task and finish groups to follow up identified areas in greater detail and to produce reports for the wider scrutiny committee. The task and finish groups are working well. Their findings have, for example, led to improvements in the way the local authority appoints its school governors and matches governors' skill sets to the needs of a governing body.

Following each scrutiny meeting, the chair writes to the cabinet member setting out findings and recommendations from the meeting, and these are generally clear and challenging. For example, following the task and finish group, which met with headteachers from schools categorised as red, the chair of scrutiny's letter included challenges and recommendations to the education department and the regional consortium. However, the letter does not include any challenges or recommendations to the schools they scrutinised.

Next steps

Cardiff Council has made satisfactory progress overall since the monitoring visit in February 2014.

There are important areas in this report that require particular attention. For example:

- Improve the performance of pupils at key stage 4, particularly in the wider capped points score, level 2 and level 1 threshold
- Improve the percentage of young people that are not in education, employment or training
- Improve the information that the authority has on the extent and quality of provision made by schools for pupils educated away from the school site
- Ensure that the local authority's self-evaluation evaluates the impact of actions taken
- Ensure that areas for improvement are supported by suitable action plans

Your link inspectors will continue to support and challenge the authority as part of their usual link role.

Estyn will make arrangements to discuss the findings of this visit with the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and to the Auditor General for Wales for information.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

Cc: Welsh Government
Auditor General for Wales