

Mr Colin Everett
Chief Executive
Flintshire County Council
County hall
Mold
Flintshire
CH7 6NB

4 March 2013

Dear Mr Everett

Estyn Monitoring Visit 4 – 8 February 2013

Following Estyn's core inspection of education services for children and young people in October 2011, the authority was identified as requiring follow-up through Estyn monitoring. A monitoring visit took place from the 4-8 February 2013. This letter records the outcomes of that visit.

Mererid Stone HMI led a team of five inspectors to review the progress made by the authority against the recommendations arising from the core inspection, to consider the current performance of the authority and to identify any further areas for improvement.

The team held discussions with the leader of the council, elected members, the chief executive, senior officers, headteachers and partner representatives. Inspectors scrutinised documentation, including evidence on the progress made on each of the Estyn's recommendations. They also considered outcomes from all Estyn inspections undertaken in the authority since the original inspection in October 2011. The team also liaised with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (CSSIW).

At the end of the monitoring visit, the team reported their findings to the leader of the council, cabinet member for education, chief executive, corporate director, chief education officer and other senior officers of the authority.

Outcome of the monitoring visit

Since the Estyn inspection in 2011, the new administration has prioritised the need for change and improvement in the directorate of Lifelong Learning. The chief executive and director of education accept the need for swift action in order to remove hurdles to improvement and, already, arrangements for the new single plan

aim to streamline planning arrangements. Members and senior officers are committed to taking difficult decisions to improve provision and make effective use of resources. They have taken useful steps to bring about service level improvements although a few important areas for development remain in leadership and management.

The authority has improved its arrangements to support and challenge schools. It provides its schools and officers with a good range of data analysis, including comparisons with similar schools using the free-school-meal benchmarks. Officers use this wide range of data to identify more accurately school strengths and areas for development. The regional categorisation model has a clear focus on assessing the standards achieved by pupils and the quality of leadership and management in schools. However, the level of support that schools are entitled to as a result of their categorisation is not always fully understood by headteachers and governors. Following visits to schools officers produce useful reports on standards and provision. However, these reports vary significantly in content and quality and identified actions for future improvement do not always focus sufficiently on raising standards.

The authority has comprehensive planning and performance management arrangements. It evaluates its performance quarterly and completes an annual self-evaluation. However these arrangements mainly focus on recording actions that have been completed rather than evaluating whether these have brought about improvement. The Lifelong Learning directorate plan identifies appropriate themes and policy priorities for action. However corporate and service plans focus on delivery measures rather than outcomes and individual initiatives and projects are not evaluated well enough to know whether they have an impact. As a result elected members and senior officers do not always know exactly how much progress has been made and are not able to consistently hold others to account.

The authority has made good progress on developing a revised funding formula for its schools. Members and senior officers have engaged effectively with headteachers and finance officers to prioritise this work. The authority has also made good progress in monitoring provision for pupils with additional learning needs placed out-of-county. This work has included a thorough review of its procurement policy and of individual placements and has led to a significant reduction in the overall cost of the provision.

The Children and Young People Partnership's plan is outside the main corporate planning arrangements of the council. These two planning systems make it difficult for partners to work effectively with core education services. It leads to duplication and missed opportunities to dovetail resources and interventions to support the most vulnerable learners.

Overall, the team judged that the local authority had made good progress towards addressing the recommendations in the inspection report.

Therefore, as a result of these findings, the authority will be removed from the follow-up category of Estyn Monitoring.

Your link inspectors will continue, through their normal link role with the authority, to monitor overall progress and your continued work to make sure that all of Estyn's recommendations are fully addressed.

Progress on recommendations in the report

R1 Improve standards and performance to reduce the percentage of schools that are in the bottom 25% when compared to similar schools across Wales and reduce the gap in performance between boys and girls

This recommendation has been partly addressed

In 2012 performance in key stage 4 improved more quickly than Wales. It remains among the best in Wales for those indicators that involve English or Welsh first language and mathematics and also for the level 1 threshold. More able pupils do not attain as well as expected on the higher national curriculum levels and GCSE grades in secondary schools and in English in key stage 2. However the percentage of pupils gaining the core subject indicator in key stage 2 dropped below the average for Wales and performance in key stage 3 improved at a slower rate than Wales as a whole.

When the performance of Flintshire schools is compared to similar schools on the free school meal benchmarks performance in key stage 4 is above average on three of the five indicators and average on the remaining two. However it is below average in the Foundation Phase and in key stage 2 and well below average in key stage 3 where a half of all schools are in the bottom 25% and no schools are in the top 25%.

The gap in performance between boys and girls is less than the average for Wales in most indicators although it is larger at key stage 2.

R2 Improve the standard and quality of provision in primary schools by addressing a trend of declining attendance; reducing fixed term exclusions; and reducing school balances and deficits in line with national guidelines

This recommendation has been largely addressed

In 2012, attendance in primary schools improved. When compared to similar school on the free-school-meal benchmarks attendance is good. Schools and their governing bodies now monitor attendance levels regularly and take appropriate action to address low attendance in conjunction with the schools' inclusion service and other agencies. Training for governors, provided by the local authority, has helped to raise governors' awareness of attendance issues in their own schools. This has enabled them to challenge school leaders more effectively when attendance is below target levels.

There has been a downward trend in the number of days lost through exclusions in primary schools since 2010. Despite this, the overall numbers of pupils excluded actually increased in 2012. Headteachers now receive better support through multi-agency working when pupils are at risk of exclusion. The authority has provided behaviour management training for teachers and teaching assistants to further

reduce exclusions, although it is too early to assess the impact on reducing exclusions. School improvement officers increasingly include attendance and exclusion issues in discussions with schools.

Since the last inspection, the authority has put in place good systems to reduce school balances and deficits in line with legislative limits. Headteachers and members, through the schools' budget forum and the scrutiny committee, have agreed these. All primary schools with budget surpluses now submit spending plans to reduce these surpluses to the authority for approval. Projected figures indicate a significant reduction in the overall surplus by the end of March 2013. In addition, schools with budget deficits are required to apply to the local authority for a budget deficit licence and permission to plan a budget deficit requires a robust and approved budget recovery plan to be in place.

R3 Improve how senior officers and all elected members work together to improve standards for all learners; improve self-evaluation and reporting to members; and reorganise secondary schools, reduce surplus places and make better use of resources

This recommendation has been largely addressed

Key elected members understand well the priorities for improvement in the council and support officers in addressing the recommendations from the previous inspection. In recent months elected members and senior officers have been willing to take difficult decisions in order to address these priorities.

The authority has recently introduced a Schools Performance Monitoring Group where elected members and senior officers challenge the performance of primary schools identified as causing concern. Schools are followed up rigorously and return to the group to report their progress. This has already had an impact on leadership and management in targeted primary schools. However, at present, secondary schools are not held to account in the same way.

Members of Cabinet and of the Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny receive reports from officers including information on standards of performance in schools. However reports on standards do not include information on the performance of vulnerable groups of pupils or the performance of individual schools. This has made it difficult for members to challenge performance appropriately and ensure accountability. Officers have provided training for elected members in the use of performance data although this did not include a full enough range of analyses. However, very recent performance reports seen by inspectors address many of these areas, although elected members had not seen this new format of report at the time of monitoring visit.

The authority provided a self-evaluation of its progress against the recommendations from the last inspection. This was very positive in tone and concentrated on successes. The authority's assessment of whether it has addressed the recommendations focuses too much on completing actions rather than evaluating

their effectiveness in improving outcomes. As a result it is difficult for elected members and senior officers to know whether enough progress is being made.

In the summer of 2012 the new administration moved promptly to agree preferred options for a significant reorganisation of secondary schools in three areas within the county. Following thorough consultation, the council will consider final proposals in March 2013. The authority has also worked well to develop and adopt additional projects aimed at reducing surplus places and making more effective use of resources. It has already published statutory notices to close a small school and is presently consulting on proposals to create two new 3-11 schools by amalgamating the remaining infant and junior schools. A new primary school was opened in September 2012 and work has started on new buildings for another primary school which will be completed by September 2014.

R4 Reduce the number of days' education that learners in Flintshire miss due to fixed term exclusions of six days or more in all of its secondary schools

This recommendation has been largely addressed

Since the last inspection, the local authority has improved its processes for dealing with poor behaviour by pupils. It is encouraging schools to take greater responsibility for dealing with poor behaviour in schools. It is challenging schools more robustly on exclusions, providing training for governors and staff, and developing internal behaviour units in secondary schools.

Headteachers, with the support of the local authority, have recently developed common guidelines for schools on how to deal with poor behaviour, in particular around the need for greater consistency in how the length of fixed term exclusions is applied. The authority now produces monthly exclusion reports that provide a detailed analysis of exclusions across the county. Local authority officers and headteachers have made good use of these comparative reports to monitor exclusion rates across schools.

As a result the rate of fixed-term exclusions of six days or more has improved and unverified data indicates that it has nearly halved over the last two years. This reflects reduced exclusion rates in most secondary schools over the last academic year. The rate of pupils excluded for five days or less has remained the same although the average number of days lost per exclusion has increased over the same period. This is largely due to high exclusion rates from two secondary schools.

R5 Improve the monitoring arrangements for the Children and Young People's Partnership to effectively track the progress of children and young people

This recommendation has been partly addressed

Each partner within the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP) uses a consistent approach to self-evaluation. This means that the authority has valuable information about the range of interventions supporting children, young people and

their families. On occasion, this includes useful outcome data on the progress of children and young people.

Many externally funded initiatives within the partnership track the progress of learners and their families effectively. In the best examples, early bespoke interventions with families make measurable contributions to improved educational outcomes for learners.

However, the partnership does not fully capture the overall performance of interventions or track consistently the progress of children and young people. This means that opportunities are missed to make the best use of resources and interventions across sector and service boundaries. In particular, the early intervention work by wider support services with learners and their families is not known by and therefore built upon by schools or school improvement services.

The lack of strategic level data on outcomes and progress means that the partnership cannot successfully hold others to account, or be held to account by the Local Service Board.

R6 Prioritise areas for improvement identified in its self-evaluation of education services

This recommendation has been fully addressed

At the time of the last inspection the authority had identified a large number of areas for improvement. Officers have prioritised these issues and made sure that those of greatest importance are being addressed through appropriate plans. Progress is reviewed regularly and is reported in the authority's annual self-evaluation.

I am copying this letter to the Welsh Government and the Wales Audit Office for information.

Yours sincerely



Clive Phillips
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government
Wales Audit Office