

David Powell
Interim Chief Executive
Powys County Council
County Hall
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Dear Mr Powell

On 26 April 2018, Mark Campion HMI chaired an improvement conference focused on the local authority's education services for children and young people. This improvement conference is part of a pilot to try out a different way of working with local authorities to secure improvements in education services in Wales. The authority's involvement in this conference does not prejudice any future inspection of the authority or suggest any particular judgement on the current performance of the authority or its prospects for improvement.

The purpose of this improvement conference was to review progress on the issues discussed during the initial improvement conference with the local authority on 11 January 2017. The two issues discussed during this conference were:

- the authority's plans for addressing the underperformance of secondary aged pupils, including the response to the recommendations from the initial improvement conference
- the effectiveness of central finance support in overseeing school budgets, including the response to the recommendations from the initial improvement conference

During the improvement conference, inspectors considered the authority's work in addressing the issues discussed at the initial conference and its latest improvement plans. Inspectors sought assurance that the authority:

- has taken appropriate action since the initial improvement conference
- is making suitable progress in securing better outcomes for learners
- has coherent plans to continue to address the issues raised at the initial improvement conference, and that these plans may need to be revised to take into account changing circumstances
- has sufficient resources to implement its plans

- has rigorous processes in place to monitor the implementation of its plans and evaluate the impact

I have enclosed a copy of the record of the conference, which records those who participated. I am grateful for the valuable contributions during the conference from the officers and elected members that attended.

In addition to detailed feedback below, I note that, since the initial improvement conference, there has been significant change in senior officers, including at chief executive, director and head of service levels, and a new council with a new leader and a new portfolio holder for education. As a result, only 3 out of the 11 participants from Powys at the initial conference were present at this follow-up conference. The high proportion of significant personnel changes affected the delivery of action plans from the initial improvement conference and has also resulted in the development of revised plans that have had little time to make an impact.

The authority's plans for addressing the underperformance of secondary aged pupils

Estyn remains assured that the local authority understands the reasons behind the relative weak performance of its secondary schools in recent years. Two-thirds of secondary schools in Powys have been identified locally as requiring significant support and are amber or red category. Although progress has been slow and the local authority acknowledged that its monitoring of schools had not been rigorous enough, the authority is strengthening its work to quicken the pace of improvement in schools. This includes new staff to support school improvement work, a more robust approach to challenging, supporting and monitoring schools causing concern and tighter performance management arrangements.

Four secondary schools have appointed a new headteacher since the initial conference, and the authority has ensured that there is support available to these new headteachers, though it is not possible to evaluate this as part of the conference process. Only two secondary schools have middle leaders participating in the professional learning programme for middle leaders available through ERW, and I am concerned at this low take-up. I recommend that the authority works with ERW to ensure that middle leaders in other schools are receiving appropriate professional learning to meet their needs and to strengthen the quality of leadership and management in schools where this is an area for improvement.

The local authority has improved the way that it uses data to support its school improvement work and to hold officers and school leaders to account. The local authority has provided suitable training and support in the use of data to school managers, governors and elected members.

The authority has revised its school organisation policy is currently working with stakeholders to develop plans for the future of secondary schools, including sixth forms, as part of its overall plans for schools across the county.

The authority has developed its ALN and inclusion transformation programme. This has an appropriate focus on addressing weaknesses in provision for pupils of secondary school age with additional learning needs.

I note that the local authority has revised its planning processes in the education directorate since the initial conference. This was not a focus for discussion during the conference but the local authority link inspectors will consider this as part of their ongoing work.

The effectiveness of central finance support in overseeing school budgets

The local authority knows that its current budget position is unacceptable and has a good understanding of the reasons that have caused this. The authority has detailed financial data on the position of every school as well as its internal service areas. School leaders and governors as well as senior offices and elected members are all aware of relevant financial information to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities.

Over the last 12 months, the authority has issued a warning notice to six secondary schools and two primary schools, requiring these schools to take action to address their deficit budgets.

The local authority has recently ensured that Brecon High School, which is in a very poor deficit position, agreed a plan to address their budget. I note that, as a result, the local authority has not used its powers to suspend the governing body's right to a delegated budget.

The authority is currently working with stakeholders to review the local formula for delegating funding to schools. The authority is also reviewing its service level agreements with schools. The authority anticipates that improvements in both areas should result in fairer distribution of funding and in schools receiving better value for money for the services they buy from the authority.

Next steps

Estyn does not require any specific action from the local authority following this conference, other than it delivers on its revised improvement plans. Estyn's link inspectors will continue to monitor the local authority's progress through their usual work.

Estyn will not arrange a further conference next year. As a new cycle of local government education services inspections is scheduled to start in September 2018, the local authority will be inspected at some point during this cycle. This inspection will not happen until at least 12 months from the date of this latest improvement conference.

Yours sincerely

Clive Phillips
Assistant Director