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Dear Sian

### **Estyn monitoring visit, 13-15 October 2014**

Following the outcome of the inspection of education services for children and young people in May 2013, the authority was identified as requiring Estyn monitoring as follow-up to this inspection.

The first monitoring visit took place from 13-15 October 2014 and this letter records the outcomes of that visit.

Mr Mark Champion HMI led a team of two inspectors to review the progress made against two of the recommendations arising from the inspection.

The team held discussions with elected members, senior officers and staff from the Central South Consortium Joint Education Service as well as a sample of headteachers and governors. The team scrutinised documentation including evidence on the progress made against recommendations 2 and 6 since the inspection.

At the end of the visit, the team reported their findings to the leader, the cabinet member for education, the managing director and senior officers including the corporate director for children.

### **Outcome of the monitoring visit**

Since the core inspection, the head of school improvement and inclusion has been promoted to a new post in another local authority. A new head of school improvement and inclusion has been appointed but had not started at the time of the visit.

Overall, in the areas evaluated during this visit, the authority is making good progress.

## **Progress on the recommendations outlined in the inspection report in 2013**

### **Recommendation 2: Improve the rigour and the level of challenge provided to schools about their performance and quality of leadership**

The authority is making good progress in addressing this recommendation. The authority has worked well with headteachers, governors and its regional school improvement service, Central South Consortium Joint Education Service ('the regional service'), to secure improvements.

At the time of the inspection, we found that officers did not evaluate provision and leadership in schools well enough and relied too heavily on performance data to categorise schools. We also found that there was too much variation in the quality of their work and the quality assurance of their work was not robust enough to make sure that they challenged schools consistently.

During the year since the inspection, challenge advisers have taken steps to evaluate provision and leadership more effectively, using the regional service's revised Framework for Challenge and Support. Challenge advisers observed lessons in every school alongside members of the school's senior leadership team in the authority for the first time during the spring term 2014. This enabled the challenge advisers to gain first-hand evidence of the quality of teaching. By carrying out paired observations, challenge advisers were also able to judge the ability of senior leaders to evaluate lessons and validate their own internal processes for quality-assuring teaching. Challenge advisers observed senior leaders giving feedback to teachers following observations to check that feedback was clear, fair and helpful to the teacher. Alongside observations, challenge advisers scrutinised pupils' work, listened to the views of pupils and discussed the quality of provision with members of staff. This approach means that challenge advisers have a better view of the quality of provision and have been more rigorous in their challenge to the school as a result.

In addition to this work, challenge advisers reviewed other aspects of leadership within their link schools, reviewing self-evaluation documents and plans and discussing these with senior and middle leaders. The authority has started to provide useful information to challenge advisers on aspects of leadership that its officers are aware of relating to financial management, human resources, legal issues and governance. Challenge advisers have begun to take the information into account in evaluating leadership. The authority has responded appropriately to shortcomings in leadership in several schools since the inspection.

The regional service monitors closely the consistency of judgements made by challenge advisers and appropriately assures the quality of reports about schools.

Senior officers from the authority use fortnightly meetings with senior managers from the regional service to quality assure the work of challenge advisers and discuss links between the regional service and services delivered by the authority. These meetings are purposeful and action points are appropriately recorded and followed up. In addition, relevant staff from the authority and regional service meet termly to monitor progress in schools causing concern and involve the governors and senior

leaders from these schools. This approach effectively holds people to account for progress.

The authority has appropriately added the risk of the failure of the regional service to its corporate risk register. This recognises the importance of the regional service to the authority and has ensured that the authority has taken appropriate action to mitigate the risk. Integral to this is a suitable quality assurance protocol which has been agreed between the authority and the regional service and is being implemented accordingly.

Since the inspection, the authority has sent formal warning notices to three secondary schools outlining concerns about performance and other issues. In one case, the letter was issued in response to shortcomings highlighted during an Estyn inspection of the school, but in the other two cases the local authority has acted on its own evaluation of shortcomings in schools. In all cases, the authority clearly set out the targets for improvement and ensured that, primarily through the regional service, support was available to help the school address the shortcomings.. These schools have been closely monitored. One school failed to meet its targets and is now subject to formal intervention from the authority.

The authority has also used its formal intervention powers in one primary school after it had been identified as requiring significant improvement by Estyn. In spite of failing to identify the issues in advance of the inspection, the authority has since acted promptly and decisively to address shortcomings. The authority has also worked well with the regional service to learn lessons from the inspection findings and to strengthen arrangements to prevent a similar case happening again.

The authority has also appropriately written to a few other schools where they have identified a drop in performance or other issues relating to provision or leadership to record their concern and outline expectation for improvement.

At the time of the inspection, we found that governors did not receive enough training to support them in discharging their role to evaluate and challenge the quality of provision and leadership in their schools. Through specific training from the authority and through the work of challenge advisers, governors have a better understanding of provision and leadership and are more confident in their ability to challenge the headteacher. The authority has strengthened its process for appointing governors to schools so that new governors bring in skills that improve the capacity of the governing body.

#### **Recommendation 6: Strengthen arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the wellbeing of children and young people**

Following the inspection of the local authority's education services for children and young people in 2013, the local authority has responded well to this recommendation.

The implementation of the local authority's wellbeing in education strategy 2012-2015 has developed well since the inspection. The Monitoring and Evaluation group

drives the management of this strategy effectively, through a better focus on both a thematic approach to wellbeing, as well as interventions and support for specific schools where necessary.

An important outcome of the wellbeing strategy is the production of two very useful data packs on wellbeing measures. One pack provides schools with pupil level data and analysis arising from a bi-annual National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR) assessment. The second, a termly report, provides schools with a compilation of whole school data on pupil wellbeing, covering such measures as attendance, exclusions, and physical activity.

The local authority uses the NBAR data pack well to identify pupils, classes, and schools which need additional support in order to address under performance against the wellbeing measures. Generally, the local authority monitors well the impact of the NBAR project on pupil wellbeing. However, the full impact of improvements in wellbeing on teaching and learning, and on the broader outcomes for pupils in their daily lives, are not evaluated effectively

The second data pack is a recent innovation which provides clearly laid out and easily understandable data from across a range of indicators. These data packs provide the basis for discussion between local authority officers, challenge advisers and senior management teams and their governors in schools. Although the presentation of the data is clear, the evaluations arising from this information do not pose key questions effectively enough. For example, because the overall attendance at one secondary school is high, the relatively poor attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has not been highlighted as a shortcoming in the analysis of attendance for that school. Challenge advisers were not involved in the evaluation of data prior to the packs being distributed to schools. This means that there may also be inconsistencies in the evaluative messages being given by the authority and by the regional service. However, these data packs have the potential to support schools and other services to monitor and evaluate wellbeing more tightly and provide relevant services in response. Their impact on improving the wellbeing of pupils is yet to be seen.

The local authority's 'impact evaluation' reports provide a useful snapshot of the work undertaken by many of its services. These reports provide observations about progress and an evaluation of the difference the projects and services have made. However, the reports generally do not include enough detail or quantitative measures to support the conclusions drawn.

In secondary schools, the rate of fixed term exclusions of five days or fewer, and six days or more have increased. However, the local authority understands the reasons for this and is addressing the matter appropriately. The authority has used data well to inform their discussions with the schools where fixed term exclusions are an issue, and they are now monitoring on-going performance closely, and have increased behaviour support initiatives. It is too soon to measure the impact of the authority's procedures to reduce the fixed term exclusions.

The local authority and its partners have improved how they track, identify, and support young people who have the potential to become NEET (Not in Employment Education or Training). They use appropriate measures and targeted intervention at school level. This partnership has also improved the exchange information between stakeholders about how well young people take-up education, training, and employment. As a result, partners identify more quickly those who drop out and keep better track of those young people who need help and support to remain engaged. However, the sustainability of this work is not financially secure and it is not clear whether the work will continue after grant funding finishes.

### **Next steps**

Your Estyn link inspectors, Gerard Kerslake HMI and Farrukh Khan HMI, will advise you in due course about the arrangements for the final monitoring visit. The final visit will result in judgements being made on progress against all the recommendations from the inspection, including those covered in this first visit. This will lead to a judgement about whether the authority can be removed from Estyn monitoring or, if not, what further follow-up is required. The final visit will result in a published report.

Your link inspectors will continue their usual work with you between now and the final monitoring visit.

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

Yours sincerely

**Clive Phillips**  
Assistant Director

cc: Welsh Government  
Wales Audit Office