



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

A report on

**Denbighshire County Council
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by

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

About Denbighshire County Council

Denbighshire County Council is a local authority in North Wales with a total population of 94,805. The county stretches from the coastal resorts of Rhyl and Prestatyn through the historic towns of St. Asaph, Denbigh and Ruthin and the hills of the Clwydian Range, to the Dee Valley and the towns of Llangollen and Corwen. The local authority maintains eight secondary schools, 47 primary schools, two special schools and a pupil referral unit.

The local authority was last inspected in February 2012. The chief executive was appointed in April 2009 and the head of education and children's services has been in post since January 2010. The council leader has been in post since November 2007 and the main portfolio holder for education services has been in post since May 2017.

Denbighshire is one of six local authorities in the GwE regional consortium for school improvement.

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

- over a three year average, 18.7% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is similar to the Wales average (18.3%)
- 20.3% of pupils are fluent in Welsh, higher than the Wales average of 16.3%
- 5.7% of pupils are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 10.6%
- 24.3% of pupils have special educational needs, slightly higher than the Wales average of 22.6%
- 84 children per 10,000 are looked after by the local authority, lower than the Wales average of 95 children per 10,000

Summary

Over time, very strong senior leadership in the local authority has ensured a determined focus on improving provision and outcomes for learners. A highly effective impact of this is the way leaders have demonstrated the confidence to recently amalgamate the education service and the children's service into one collegiate department to deliver a coherent and efficient integrated service. This is having a very positive effect on the provision available to children and young people and a beneficial impact on learners' wellbeing.

Overall, most schools in Denbighshire perform consistently well. Although performance across the secondary schools has been variable over the last three years, standards at key stage 4 on nearly all key indicators broadly compare well over time with those in similar authorities across Wales, and with national outcomes.

The authority places great importance on learner voice, ensuring that many children and young people take part in purposeful opportunities to share their opinions, concerns and ideas for improvement. This is enabling learners to have clear channels of communication in which to improve the authority's services and provision.

The local authority knows its schools very well and supports and challenges them effectively. Overall, it has a range of appropriate provision for vulnerable learners and these are generally effective in meeting the needs of children and young people.

Inspection area	Judgement
Outcomes	Good
Quality of education services	Good
Leadership and management	Excellent

Recommendations

- R1 Reduce the variability in outcomes in secondary schools
- R2 Ensure that the evaluation of services focuses clearly on measuring the outcomes that children and young people achieve through those services

What happens next

The provider will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection. Estyn inspectors will monitor the local authority's progress against these recommendations during their link visits.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare a case study for dissemination on Estyn's website on how the authority has effectively blended the education and children's services and its resulting impact on provision and outcomes.

Main findings

Outcomes: Good

In Denbighshire, pupils make strong progress over the course of their statutory education. Denbighshire local authority has a consistent focus on ensuring that children and young people achieve well. A notable feature is that outcomes in Denbighshire are strong across nearly all key indicators over several years in primary and secondary schools, and particularly at key stage 4. Outcomes broadly compare well with those in similar authorities across Wales, and with national outcomes. Very few pupils leave school without any qualifications and the number of school leavers not in education, employment or training (NEETs) has reduced well over time. Despite consistently strong performance overall, the performance of individual secondary schools has been variable over the last three years. Over the last three years, the proportion of schools in Denbighshire judged to be at least good for standards in Estyn inspections is similar to inspection outcomes nationally. No primary or secondary school in the authority has received an unsatisfactory judgement for standards over the same period, but neither has any received an excellent judgement.

Pupils' standards in Welsh first language remain strong over their time in school.

Vulnerable learners, including pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with special educational needs, broadly perform in line with the average for their peers across Wales, as do more able learners.

Children and young people have contributed to identifying strategic priorities in the authority in recent years. For example, through their membership of the School Council Forum, Youth Forum and Young Ambassadors Forum, many young people made a valuable contribution to the local authority's consultation on its transport policy and supported the authority's planning work around the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Another notable example is the way secondary school pupils discuss good practice and areas for improvement in how their schools promote positive mental health and wellbeing in their regular county-wide school council meetings. Members of the Youth Council recently developed a comprehensive survey for pupils at secondary schools across the authority on the quality and usefulness of personal and social education lessons. They share the findings with relevant senior officers and the authority's Health and Wellbeing Group.

Another particularly strong example of how children and young people influence decision-making is the way that looked after children actively share their views on aspects of the authority's work in the half-termly 'KIC (kids in care) club'. They share creative and innovative ideas on how the authority can improve services and support for them. This has helped to promote beneficial changes to statutory review procedures, ensuring a positive impact on their confidence in the care and education system.

The levels of pupil participation are high across the many enrichment, sport and wellbeing activities and interventions offered by Denbighshire local authority. For example, the number of children and young people engaging in beneficial physical

activity through 5x60 and Dragon Sport initiatives is high. A high proportion of young people accessing the youth service gain valuable formal and non-formal awards, including vocational qualifications, sports and leisure, health and wellbeing and community awards.

School inspection outcomes for wellbeing over the last three years are generally stronger than the Wales average. Overall, pupils' attendance in both primary and secondary schools is improving. However, attendance in secondary schools remains comparatively weak. The attendance of children who are looked after by the local authority is very good. The percentage of primary and secondary school pupils who are persistently absent has decreased over time. This percentage is now slightly below the Wales average in primary schools in Denbighshire, but remains above the average in secondary schools.

The rate of fixed-term exclusions from school of five days or less has increased over in recent years and is notably higher than the Wales average. During the same period, the rate of fixed-term exclusions of six days or more has varied but was lower than the Wales average in the most recent year for which data is available. There have been very few permanent exclusions in recent years.

Quality of education services: Good

The authority has a strong moral purpose that underpins its education services, focusing on an ambition to maximise the life chances of every learner. The authority has established a joint and well-integrated working arrangement between its education and children's services, which is having a positive impact on the council's provision for children, young people and their families.

The authority knows its schools very well. It collects and analyses a wide range of information about schools including, for example, data about the progress of pupils, school finances and safeguarding. This work is supported by a useful 'school management review' tool for schools that encourages a consistent approach to self-evaluation across its schools. The information from schools is quality-assured and used well by the authority to challenge and assist schools to meet various statutory requirements and address local priorities.

The authority has very clear policies, strategies and processes that provide a strong foundation for school improvement work. The roles and responsibilities of the authority and its regional school improvement consortium (GwE) are defined clearly and understood well by authority officers, the consortium's staff and school leaders.

Through senior officers, elected members and GwE staff, schools in Denbighshire are challenged robustly about their performance, including the outcomes for pupils, the quality of teaching, the care they provide, and the quality of leadership. Schools are often supported well and in proportion to their needs following appropriate school categorisation.

Schools that are identified as causing concern receive considerable support and, where necessary, intervention. In most cases, this results in schools improving at an appropriate pace. The local authority usually tackles weak leadership in schools in a timely and dignified way and, in most cases, manages to do this effectively without using its formal powers of intervention.

Schools are supported well in aspects of national priorities, for example in improving pupils' literacy and numeracy skills and in preparing for curriculum reform. Aspiring and serving senior and middle leaders in schools have access to good quality professional learning opportunities to develop their leadership skills. The authority provides governors with helpful training and guidance that supports them to carry out their role effectively.

The authority's schools collaborate well through clusters of primary schools and their partner secondary schools, which helps them to share good practice regularly and use resources efficiently. For example, each cluster has successfully designated a lead person to provide guidance on national developments, such as the implementation of new professional standards for teaching and leadership.

Overall, the authority has a suitable range of appropriate provision for vulnerable learners, which is generally effective in meeting their needs. The authority has integrated successfully its education and children's services to create what it calls a 'blended service'. This approach enables officers to work across different service areas and to access information efficiently. As a result, officers have a very good understanding of the needs of pupils and plan relevant interventions.

In recent years, the authority has evaluated a number of key services for vulnerable learners. This has resulted in changes to the way it funds schools and the reconfiguration of a service areas. This has helped the authority to support schools and pupils more effectively in areas such as speech, communication and language difficulties and behavioural needs. The provision of specialist advice to schools through the medium of Welsh has also improved. The authority has identified the need to further develop provision for Welsh language pupils and to review resource-based provision for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. However, these are at a very early stage of planning.

The authority sets clear expectations of all schools and parents in relation to pupil attendance. The authority responds appropriately to concerns regarding attendance and where necessary has conducted in-depth reviews of schools requiring additional support.

However, the rate of fixed-term exclusions from school of five days or less has been steadily increasing over recent years. It is double that of the region and notably higher than the Wales average. The authority robustly challenges schools with high exclusion rates. However, the authority does not systematically analyse whether excluded pupils have additional learning needs and cannot be confident that schools are taking necessary measures to ensure that the needs of pupils are being met well enough.

Recently, the authority has re-configured its behaviour support service and is developing the capacity of schools to understand better the needs of pupils. For example, through the managed moves process, pupils that require a fresh start in new schools are supported well. The authority's education other than at school (EOTAS) service provides a range of valuable learning experiences for pupils. These have helped contribute to the reduction in young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) in the authority.

Beneficial counselling services are provided by the authority that are often very effective in reducing the psychological distress of young people. In addition, the local authority has a long-standing partnership with the local child and adolescent mental health services. This partnership has been effective in determining a clinical pathway for children and young people who are at risk of self-harming.

The authority has an appropriate focus on improving the transition to school of pupils with additional learning needs in non-maintained settings. Officers across service areas work very effectively to identify the support requirements of pupils. They ensure that schools are appropriately resourced and develop the knowledge and understanding of early years practitioners well.

There are appropriate procedures in place by the authority to monitor provision for pupils educated in out-of-county settings and in resource-based provision within the authority. However, reports on the out-of-county provision do not focus well enough on the progress made by pupils.

The authority provides effective support for pupils whose first language is not Welsh or English. Staff work alongside colleagues in schools and provide them with invaluable support in planning lessons, developing materials and training. In addition, the English as an additional language (EAL) service supports schools well in engaging with parents.

The authority has a very secure understanding of the extent of elective home education in the county. It has a well-established tracking system, with officers working closely with other professionals to ensure that the provision is generally appropriate. Officers have developed trusting relationships with families and provide them with suitable support and advice. Where appropriate, officers support pupils in returning to mainstream provision. This aspect of the authority's work is a particular strength.

Over a number of years, the authority has helped parents' awareness and understanding of autism including, for example, how it affects their child and how they can implement practical strategies to help reduce anxiety. In addition, all teaching and support staff in around half of Denbighshire schools have accessed online training in the national 'learning with autism' programme. This is helping the schools' special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) to become more confident and proficient in using and adapting materials and teaching approaches to better meet the needs of pupils. The authority is working to further improve provision for pupils with autism and has robust plans that are in the very early stages of implementation.

The authority has clear policies and appropriate procedures for safeguarding that meet requirements.

Officers share information effectively to ensure that they identify quickly the children below statutory school age in need of additional support. The 'Children and Family Support Gateway' helps to ensure that staff provide specific support for individual children and families from the range of services available. For example, family link workers implement programmes for parents that help to improve young children's language skills. The authority has an appropriate approach to supporting settings

that provide education for three and four-year-old children, including support from foundation phase teachers from schools and advisory teachers. As a result, provision in the majority of settings is good.

A very strong feature of the authority's work is the way it consults with children and young people when making decisions that affect them and when evaluating the wide range of the services it offers. For example, after taking account of the views of children and young people, changes to school lunch menus have contributed to notable increases in the number of pupils in both primary and secondary schools choosing to use school catering services. During the planning stage of building a new school, pupils visited schools outside the county to see the facilities on offer. They then attended consultation sessions to help parents and members of the community understand the benefits of school re-organisation proposals as well as shaping the development of their new school. Officers and elected members hold regular, useful meetings with young people in order to seek their views, for example through the Youth Forum.

The authority's 2017-2020 Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) demonstrates a strong commitment to developing services through the medium of Welsh. The authority's plans for increasing the percentage of learners in Welsh-medium provision are suitably ambitious, as are the targets to increase the percentage of subjects taught through the medium of Welsh in schools that currently teach less than 50%. There are sufficient places in all phases for learners who choose Welsh-medium education.

The authority provides a good range of learning opportunities for pupils over the age of 16. Learners access both academic and vocational education through schools and collaborative partnerships between schools, local colleges such as Coleg Cambria and Coleg Llandrillo, and training providers. There are valuable opportunities for pupils to find out about different careers, for example through the 'ready for work' programme, which enables pupils to learn about local businesses and industries and the employment opportunities that they offer in the locality.

There are good quality youth services provided by the authority that meet the needs of a wide range of young people. These provide opportunities for young people to participate in a range of beneficial activities, such as the Duke of Edinburgh award. Youth support officers plan bespoke programmes to support specific groups of young people well, such as sports activities for young disabled people during school holiday periods. In addition, cultural initiatives such as the 'Arts Together' project increase opportunities to engage vulnerable families. Officers review the services offered regularly to ensure that they interest young people.

Officers and elected members implement the authority's modernising education programme successfully. They consult well with local communities to ensure that all stakeholders understand the purpose and value of the authority's school re-organisation proposals. These plans, and the authority's robust building maintenance arrangements, have improved the school estate and facilities, including sports and play areas. In addition, the authority's school re-organisation plans have reduced surplus capacity in primary schools. Officers plan well to ensure sufficient school places, with nearly all pupils attending their first choice of school.

Leadership and management: Excellent

The authority's political and strategic leadership is highly effective. The leader of the council and chief executive have a clear and very ambitious vision for outcomes for children and young people and education services. This vision is understood well by senior officers and elected members. It has been shared effectively with all stakeholders.

The belief that 'every child really matters' permeates the work of the authority, and leaders, officers and staff demonstrate consistently a genuine sense of moral purpose that all learners should achieve their potential. This has contributed to the authority sustaining good outcomes for its children and young people over many years across nearly all the key indicators as well impacting positively on children and young people's wellbeing.

Senior leaders set high expectations, lead teams effectively and collaborate well to drive strategic priorities, which are addressed directly through clear joined-up strategic plans.

The new 2017-2022 corporate plan demonstrates the council's clear commitment to improving education, with one of its five main objectives being to develop Denbighshire as 'a place where younger people will want to live and work and have the skills to do so'. It is a well thought-through plan, having careful consideration to the viewpoints of residents and other stakeholders and reflects relevant national and local priorities well. The plan gives due consideration to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act in the way it aims to build resilience in its communities and its residents. The education and children's service plan identifies four relevant key priorities, including providing support for vulnerable learners and ensuring that all learners attain the right knowledge and skills in order to achieve their potential. Each priority has relevant, well-defined progress indicators and measurable actions for improvement. They have specific, realistic timescales, and allocate appropriate responsibility for their delivery. As a result, leaders and teams have a sound understanding of what they need to achieve.

The authority's approaches to managing complex change are very effective. The chief executive has undertaken a high-level strategic review of the education service, which has resulted in a restructure of the education and children's services to create one coherent 'blended' service. This means that the local authority is much more interconnected in the way it delivers services to young people. The blended service has had a very positive impact on the provision available to support children and young people. This has contributed to the authority's good understanding of the needs of families and learners, which helps them to respond quickly to their needs, implementing intervention and support early.

The Head of Education and Children's services is a highly effective and exemplary leader. She works successfully with other senior leaders to deliver the education service plan and has an unrelenting drive to ensure that children and young people in Denbighshire are provided with the education services that they require in order to succeed. She ensures that there are clear lines of communication within teams and with members of the public, partners and service users, which helps to ensure that services are delivered well.

The authority has useful, well-established processes for evaluating the quality of its services. For example, service performance challenge events by key elected members and senior officers provide an effective forum for reviewing progress and holding officers to account. Team challenge events are also used appropriately to challenge officers and teams within services on the priorities and targets within their operational plans. Generally, leaders and officers evaluate the local authority's provision robustly. However, the evaluations of the impact of a very few internal and commissioned services are limited by an inconsistent approach to setting clear and measurable outcomes, and do not consistently evaluate the outcomes that children and young people achieve through those services.

Elected members and senior leaders have a good understanding of education issues across the authority and challenge officers robustly to bring about improvement. They challenge and support policy development well, for example through taking difficult decisions when revising the school transport policy.

Generally, they make effective use of performance indicators to monitor progress against milestones and take appropriate remedial action, such as routinely seeking assurance of the provision provided by GwE.

Across the authority, nearly all officers show a strong commitment to their own professional learning, updating their knowledge and skills regularly. They do this within their own areas of responsibility through a range of well-considered, purposeful activities. The authority also offers useful online learning through an e-learning platform. This enables a flexible approach to targeted and bespoke learning across a variety of topics. The blended service and service challenges result in stronger collaborative working. In addition, leaders identify suitable professional learning needs through regular performance appraisal processes.

Staff engage positively with a range of regional and national networks. They share their own good practice in these fora, for example when outlining how they faced the challenge of bringing the two service areas of Education and Children's Services together. These activities impact positively on provision and leadership within the authority, and encourage officers to evaluate and amend their working practices purposefully.

The authority has a well-developed and robust set of arrangements for allocating resources to its priorities as set out in its Corporate Plan. Its commitment to education has seen it allocate additional funding to education at a time of budget reductions across other service areas. Between 2011 and 2017, the authority provided schools with funding above the level of the Welsh Government's protection. During 2017-2018, the authority plans to spend more per pupil than the Welsh average. However, the authority has yet to develop a comprehensive, strategic approach to securing external funding to support the achievement of its educational priorities.

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. Cluster-based school business and finance managers provide regular and comprehensive data on schools' finances to the authority schools funding team. This data allows the team to understand schools' budgetary positions in detail. Schools highly value the support that business and finance managers provide for managing their budgets.

The authority has a suitable and transparent funding formula, which takes account of the relevant factors for schools. The authority's School Budget Forum reviewed the funding formula thoroughly in 2013 and keeps this under review on an ongoing basis. The authority has a well-structured approach to setting school budgets over a rolling three-year period, including a comprehensive, staged challenge and intervention process for those schools that have a planned budget deficit. The authority and schools have a shared understanding of the reasons for those deficits. In the current financial year, the authority's challenge and intervention process has started to consolidate the overall school deficit position.

To respond appropriately to the changing financial climate, the authority has recently established its 'Reshaping the Council Budget Board'. The aim of this board is to provide a strategic approach to identifying sufficient transformational savings to support sustainable approaches to service provision. The work of the board is at an early stage.

Copies of the report

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

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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:

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