

Quality and Standards in Post-16 Education and Learning in Wales

Area Inspection Report

**The quality of education and learning for
residents of Blaenau Gwent aged 16-19**

May 2005



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi Dros Addysg
A Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate
For Education and Training in Wales

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- ▲ youth support services;
- ▲ LEAs;
- ▲ teacher education and training;
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- ▲ work-based training;
- ▲ careers companies; and
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- ▲ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others; and
- ▲ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence.

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The legal basis for inspection

As a part of its 2004-05 remit work for the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn was asked to carry out an area inspection of and to report on the quality of education and training (learning) for residents of Blaenau Gwent aged 16-19.

Estyn carries out area inspections under section 83 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. This states that if asked to do so by the National Assembly, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training for Wales must inspect:

- (a) the quality and availability of a specified description of education or training, in a specified area in Wales, for persons who are aged 16 or over¹;
- (b) the standards achieved by those receiving that education or training; and
- (c) whether the financial resources made available to those providing that education and training are managed efficiently and used in a way which provides value for money.

The Chief Inspector may, without being asked to, conduct such an inspection. In completing an area inspection, the Chief Inspector must make a written report.

Section 84 of the Act empowers the National Assembly to direct the National Council or a local education authority (LEA) to prepare a written statement of the action it proposes to take in the light of an area inspection report published by the Chief Inspector. The statement must set out when the action proposed is to be taken. In preparing such a statement, the Council or LEA must consult with such persons as the National Assembly may direct. The action plan must be published within the prescribed period under regulation 4 of the Inspection of Education and Training (Wales) Regulations 2001, which is between 40 and 50 days. Estyn will evaluate the action plan and approve it if it clearly addresses the issues identified in the report and indicates how improvement is to be achieved. Estyn may also ask specific providers to prepare action plans in relation to matters that lie within their responsibility. The Council or LEA must copy action plans to the Welsh Assembly Government.

Her Majesty's Inspectors for Education and Training in Wales and/or additional inspectors conduct area inspections. A nominee representing the providers is also a member of the inspection team, but the nominee does not take part in discussions about grading.

¹ Subsequently changed to 14 plus in Section 178, Education Act 2002.

The format of the inspection

The inspection team used the common inspection framework for the area inspection, supported by handbooks of guidance for each sector inspected. The inspectors also followed the guidance on conducting area inspections. These documents are available on the Estyn website at www.estyn.gov.uk.

Estyn applies one of the following grades to each key question of the common inspection framework:

Grade 1	Good with outstanding features
Grade 2	Good features and no important shortcomings
Grade 3	Good features outweigh shortcomings
Grade 4	Some good features but shortcomings in important areas
Grade 5	Many important shortcomings

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Context of the area

Social and economic features

- 1 Blaenau Gwent has a population of about 70,000, making it the third smallest unitary authority in Wales. The population is mainly located within three valleys and the largest centres of population are in Ebbw Vale, Tredegar and Abertillery. It has the smallest proportion in Wales of people who speak Welsh as a first language. It has very few people from minority ethnic minority groups. Geographically, it is the smallest unitary authority in Wales with a total area of only 109 square kilometres.
- 2 The area is one of the most socio-economically deprived in Wales. It has a high level of unemployment and economic inactivity. Thirteen of its 16 wards have Community First status due to their relatively high levels of deprivation. There is a 30% disability rate amongst those of working age. Fewer people own their homes in the area than anywhere else in Wales and over a third of households have no car.
- 3 The population trend in the area is declining. The population has dropped by about 4400 in just over ten years. This is also reflected in falling school rolls. Over the last six years, the total number of pupils in the area's primary schools fell by just under 12%. The number of pupils in secondary schools is projected to fall by about 9% over the next few years.
- 4 Just under a quarter of secondary school pupils are entitled to free school meals. This is the second highest proportion in Wales. The area has the highest proportion of people in Wales with no qualifications (33%) and the lowest proportion of people with degrees (5%).
- 5 There are 1,357 businesses in the borough. The vast majority of these (87%) employ fewer than 25 employees. The closure of the Corus steelworks in Ebbw Vale took away a major source of relatively well-paid employment in the area. The largest business sectors are in retail and education with about 2,300 employees each. The proportion of employees who receive job-related training is the lowest in Wales (just above 12%). Often this is because small businesses are reluctant to release employees for training due to the direct impact on their business activities.
- 6 Overall, 16-19 providers of education and training in Blaenau Gwent face many challenges in tackling the low performance of learners in the area. For many learners, there is no history of educational attainment in their families upon which to build. A significant minority of learners come from households where the adults have been economically inactive for a long time.

The pattern of provision for 16-19 year olds

- 7 In 2004, there were about 900 sixteen year olds in the borough. About two-thirds were in the four 11-18 schools (Nantyglo, Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Brynmawr, which is a foundation school) and a third in the two 11-16 schools (Abertillery and Glyncoed). A few 16 year olds were in the pupil referral unit (Thomas Richard Centre) or were receiving home tuition provided by the local education authority due

to illness or exclusion from school. A few were following a denominational or Welsh-medium education in secondary schools outside the borough as there are no schools of this type available in Blaenau Gwent itself.

- 8 In 2004, about a quarter (238) stayed on into the sixth form at their present schools, just over a third (329) went to Coleg Gwent, the local further education college, and a few transferred to a different school for sixth form study (18). Many more young women stay on at school into the sixth form than young men.
- 9 The size of the school sixth forms is small. The number of 16-19 learners ranges from about 60 at Nantyglo to about 120 at Tredegar. The average size of a sixth form in the borough is just under 100 learners.
- 10 Well over half the learners who go to the further education college (Coleg Gwent) go to its Ebbw Vale campus to follow mainly vocational courses. Most of the others travel outside the borough to the college's campus at Crosskeys, where they follow mainly A level courses. A few learners follow vocational courses on the college's other campuses at Pontypool, Usk, Newport and Abergavenny.
- 11 Just under 100 learners enter work-based training at 16, most without employed status. About the same number enter employment at 16, mainly without planned training opportunities. About 9% (80) are unemployed when they leave school at 16.
- 12 Coleg Gwent offers a wide range of vocational and academic courses at all levels, including 44 A level and 47 AS level courses across all of its campuses. The widest range of A level courses is available at the Crosskeys campus. The Ebbw Vale campus focuses mainly on the provision of vocational courses, though there are a few A level courses on offer.
- 13 School sixth forms mainly offer A level courses which follow on directly from National Curriculum subjects at key stage 4. The choice of courses on offer varies from 11 A level subjects in Nantyglo to 19 in Brynmawr. Schools also offer one or two vocational courses at level 2 or 3. There are some A level courses taught collaboratively between schools during the day, and between schools and the college's Ebbw Vale campus after school hours. These arrangements often require learners to travel between sites.
- 14 There are two work-based learning providers located in Blaenau Gwent. However, over thirty other providers, based outside the borough, offer learning programmes for 16-19 year olds at various places of employment. Work-based learning companies offer Modern Apprenticeship, Foundation Modern Apprenticeship, Skillbuild and Preparatory programmes. Most learners undertake training in the retail sector or engineering and manufacturing sector. Few undertake training in construction, leisure, tourism, hospitality or catering.

The participation of 16-19 year olds in education and training

- 15 The rate at which young people in the borough engage in full-time education and training is low in comparison with other local authority areas. About three-quarters

of learners carry on with education or work-based learning at the age of 16. This is much lower than average. The rate at which 16 year olds participate in work-based learning is also the lowest in Wales (10%).

- 16 About two-thirds of learners carry on in full-time education at 16. This is much lower than the national average and lower than the average for the Gwent area. Only 55% of young men carry on in full-time education at 16 compared to about 70% nationally. Seventy-five per cent of young women are in full-time education at 16 and this is much closer to the national average.
- 17 A higher than average proportion of young people go directly into employment at 16 without planned training opportunities. The proportion of young people who are unemployed at 16 is also high. Far more young men go directly into employment at 16 than young women. Twice as many young men are unemployed at 16 than young women.

Regeneration and 'The Learning Campus' in Ebbw Vale

- 18 The borough has responded to its economic and demographic problems in a variety of ways. In particular, the 'Five Counties Regeneration Strategy' identified in 2002 the development of a lifelong learning agenda as a key economic driver for the region. The subsequent 'Blaenau Gwent Regeneration Programme' identified 'The Ebbw Vale Learning Campus' as a key project for the regeneration of Ebbw Vale and Blaenau Gwent. The aim of the project is to build new education, leisure, community and business facilities on the previous Corus site and to replace the existing sixth form provision. Its aim is to improve education and training opportunities, to create more and better jobs and to improve the health and well-being of the local community.
- 19 Currently, the Corus site has almost been cleared in readiness for the development. External consultants have investigated the long-term sustainability of the project and produced a business case in February 2005. This has led to a reduction in the size of some of the proposed developments while retaining the overall vision of the project. The project requires funding from a variety of sources, including the Welsh Assembly Government, Wales Development Agency, SportLot, the Arts Council for Wales and the European Union Social Fund. As yet, the exact nature and timescale of the development are unclear, but it is envisaged that the new campus will become operational in 2009-2010.

Summary

- 20 Overall, the quality of education and learning for the residents of Blaenau Gwent aged 16-19 is reasonable. However important shortcomings have been identified in the strategic management, use of resources and the level of participation of 16-19 year olds in post-16 education and learning which currently stands at the lowest level in Wales.
- 21 Major players, including employers and training providers operating in the Blaenau Gwent do not work closely enough together at a strategic level, and with ELWa, to develop appropriate and relevant, high quality education and learning in Blaenau Gwent. Immediate issues to be resolved include the rationalisation of sixth forms and improvement in the quality of work-based learning. Overall, learners do not attain at high levels at the end of their secondary education. Their relatively low achievement at the end of compulsory schooling limits the capacity of the area to produce strong 16-19 outcomes. Improvements in pre-16 standards are necessary if prospects for post-16 learners are to improve.
- 22 Overall, the standards achieved by young people aged 16-19 are improving across all the sectors, but often from a low base. Many 16-19 year old learners are making fair progress given their starting points at the end of key stage 4. However, there is relatively little work that is outstanding across all of the providers.
- 23 In both the schools and the college, there is a significant amount of underperformance by young men aged 16-19. Overall, their attainment is much weaker than young women in the area and the gap in attainment is wider than average for Wales.
- 24 Learners in Blaenau Gwent have a reasonable choice of education and training routes when they reach the age of sixteen and most receive adequate guidance about the options available to them. The further education college offers a wide range of vocational and academic courses and good opportunities for progression and accreditation. The schools offer a limited range of A levels and vocational courses post-16.
- 25 Overall, too many young people in the area do not participate in the education and training routes available to them, especially young men.
- 26 There are too many work-based learning providers in the area offering training of poor quality. There are not enough opportunities for learners to progress to level 2 and 3 programmes in work-based learning. Most work-based learning providers do not have adequate policies and procedures in place for the protection of all young people and vulnerable adults in their care.
- 27 The local Community Consortia for Education and Training and the 14-19 local area network have helped to develop better relationships and closer collaboration between providers, especially the schools and the college. However, there is little

involvement of employers and work-based training providers. This weakens the efforts of the other main education and learning players in Blaenau Gwent in working together at a strategic level to make sure that learners follow routes that will meet employers' needs and lead on to full time jobs.

- 28 The impact of the local area network at this early stage in its development is limited. Developments on the ground are relatively small in scale and at the margins.
- 29 The local partners in education and training have worked well in developing 'The Learning Campus' project in Ebbw Vale. However, it has led to some inactivity in the mid-term in planning the development of 16-19 provision, as it has tended to dominate all discussion about the future. Overall, there is a lack of robust planning for the interim period before the new campus is established. There is not enough contingency planning taking place in case the campus does not happen.
- 30 The small size of the area means that many 16-19 learners access provision outside the borough. This has made it difficult for the local area network to secure a full understanding of everything that affects the learning of its 16-19 residents. Overall, there are not enough cross-boundary mechanisms in place for the local area to forge the links necessary to plan, monitor and influence all of the provision that is available to its learners.
- 31 Overall the systems for assuring quality are reasonable across the different sectors. The systems are generally better in the college and the schools than in the work-based learning providers. There is no common format for self-evaluation across the sectors. This makes it difficult for the local area network to compare quality across all the providers.
- 32 The four school sixth forms are small and, as a result, there are major issues in relation to their cost effectiveness, the value for money they offer and their viability. Their class sizes are often too small and they require a cross subsidy from key stages 3 and 4 to sustain them. This conflicts with the objective of the local education authority, which is to direct funds towards early intervention in primary schools and within key stage 3 in order to improve pre-16 standards in the longer term. Surplus school places in the borough add further pressure on the viability and value for money of the current arrangements.

Grades awarded

Key question		Grade
KQ1	How well do learners achieve?	3
KQ2	How effective are teaching, training and assessment?	3
KQ3	How well do the learning experiences meet the needs and interests of learners and the wider community?	4
KQ4	How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3

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KQ5	How effective are leadership and strategic management?	4
KQ6	How well do leaders and managers evaluate and improve quality and standards?	3
KQ7	How efficient are leaders and managers in using resources?	4

Recommendations

- 32 In order to improve standards and the quality of education and training for 16-19 learners in Blaenau Gwent, ELWa, the local education authority and providers of education and training need to:
- R1 work more closely together to make sure that learners in Blaenau Gwent have the opportunity to participate in high quality, relevant provision of post-16 education and learning that provides good value for money;
 - R2 rationalise the sixth form provision in order to ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness in the interim period before the establishment of the Learning Campus;
 - R3 immediately develop a contingency plan for post-16 provision for the period 2005-2010 in case the Learning Campus development does not happen;
 - R4 increase the participation of young people in post-16 education and training, especially young men;
 - R5 analyse in more detail the implications of new post-16 funding models on school sixth forms and disseminate the outcomes widely amongst the local community;
 - R6 improve the amount of good and outstanding education and learning in all sectors, especially amongst the proportion of learners who achieve the higher grades at A level;
 - R7 improve the rates at which learners complete training frameworks within the work-based learning sector and increase the opportunities for progression to level 2 and 3 courses;
 - R8 improve the contribution that learning technology makes to teaching and learning across the sectors and expand the opportunities for e-learning and distance learning;
 - R9 improve the teaching and planning for key skills, especially in work-based learning;
 - R10 make sure that all work-based learning providers have adequate policies and procedures for the protection of all young people and vulnerable adults;
 - R11 make sure that the quality of provision influences local planning more fully, especially in relation to the award of ELWa contracts to work-based learning providers;
 - R12 explore ways to make cross-boundary information on outcomes, and the quality of provision outside of the borough, more available to the local area network so that information on quality can influence its strategic planning; and

R13 establish a common value-added model for measuring and comparing the progress of A level learners for use in the schools and the college; and

Standards in the education and training of 16-19 year olds

Key Question 1: How well do learners achieve?

Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

- 33 Overall, learners do not attain at high levels at the end of their secondary education. The average GCSE and GNVQ points score per pupil in the borough is the lowest in Wales (44%). The low achievement at the end of compulsory schooling limits the capacity of the area to produce strong 16-19 outcomes. The local education authority has recognised the importance of boosting learners' attainments pre-16. It has focused much of its attention on raising standards in the earlier years of compulsory education, including the transition from primary to secondary school.
- 34 Overall, the standards achieved by 16-19 year olds are improving across the school, further education and work-based learning sectors. Many 16-19 learners are making fair progress given their starting points. The analysis of value-added measures for the school sixth forms and the college's A level provision shows that learners generally achieve as well as or better than expected given their attainment at GCSE.
- 35 In the sixth forms, the proportion of learners gaining two A-E grades at A level is improving (94%). It is now only slightly below the Wales average. However, the proportion gaining the higher grades (A-C) at A level is only 46%. This is well below the average for Wales (69%) and progress towards improving the proportion is slow.
- 36 Learners' performance at A level in the further education sector is also improving. The rate at which learners pass A level examinations at the Crosskeys campus, where the bulk of A level courses take place, is reasonable in most subjects. The rate at which full-time 16-19 learners from Blaenau Gwent complete their courses (86%) is good across the college. The learners from Blaenau Gwent tend to do at least as well as the overall average for all, 16-19 year olds at the college.
- 37 Learners involved in the collaborative A level courses between the schools and the Ebbw Vale campus attain reasonable standards overall (although standards in one AS Psychology course are unsatisfactory). The very small number of learners who take A level courses only at Ebbw Vale campus tend to do less well than those following A level courses at the Crosskeys campus or who are involved in collaborative arrangements between the college and the schools.
- 38 In both the schools and the college, there is a significant amount of underperformance by young men. Overall, young men aged 16-19 do much worse than young women of the same age in A level and vocational courses. Most of those who enter employment without training at 16 are also young men (56 young men aged 16 last year compared to 17 young women).

- 39 There is a lack of outstanding work achieved in the school, further education and work-based learning sectors. This is reflected in the relatively small proportion of outstanding work observed in recent school, further education and work-based learning inspections. It is also reflected in the low proportion of high grades achieved in A level courses.
- 40 Standards in work-based learning are improving, but from a low base. Trainees are acquiring additional qualifications at a reasonable rate and key skills results are getting better, but, overall, the proportion of trainees achieving the full framework and the relevant NVQ is poor.

Standards in the education and training of 16-19 year olds

Key Question 2: How effective are teaching, training and assessment?

Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

- 41 Overall, the quality of teaching is reasonable in school sixth forms, the further education college and the work-based learning providers.
- 42 The quality of teaching on vocational courses within the college is sound overall. The quality of some teaching in vocational areas, for example in Engineering and Hair and Beauty, is good. However, overall, the quality of teaching tends to be better and at a more consistently high level in level 3 courses than in vocational courses at level 1 and level 2. The relatively small amount of unsatisfactory teaching tends to occur more often on level 1 and 2 courses.
- 43 Teachers in all sectors have good knowledge of the subjects and occupational areas that they teach and respond confidently to questions from learners. The range of teaching strategies is generally appropriate, with a strong focus on meeting the requirements of the examination syllabus or the awarding body. Most lessons and training sessions have an appropriate structure. Teachers communicate learning objectives clearly to students and trainees. In work-based learning, trainers make frequent visits to learners in the workplace and establish effective links with employers and work-based assessors to support learners' progress. The level of challenge and the rate at which teachers cover the work is appropriate in most cases, but in a few sessions some activities go on for too long and lack variety.
- 44 The contribution of learning technology to sessions is not as strong as it could be across all the sectors. Some teachers use learning technology well, for example in some Engineering and Applied Science sessions in the college, but, overall, teachers do not use learning technology enough.
- 45 Marking, assessment and feedback to learners on their progress are generally positive features, but marking is not of a consistently high standard across subjects in the schools and within the college. Learners on A level courses usually know the grade that has been set as a target at the end of their course as result of discussion

with their teachers and tutors. However, target setting is too variable across the sectors, especially on vocational programmes in the college and in work-based learning providers. Too many learners in work-based learning providers do not know exactly what they have to achieve for the next review of their training.

- 46 The relationship between staff and learners is nearly always good and there are many examples of staff providing extra help for individuals, especially within work-based learning where many staff work unsociable hours to accommodate the shift patterns of learners.
- 47 Overall, teachers in the college integrate work on key and basic skills better into their programmes than in schools or work-based learning providers. In work-based learning, teachers often do not introduce key skills early enough into their programmes to help learners achieve the full training framework.

Key question 3: How well do the learning experiences meet the needs and interests of learners and the wider community?

Grade 4: Some good features but shortcomings in important areas
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- 48 About 76% of Blaenau Gwent learners aged 16 carry on with education or work-based learning. This proportion is much lower than the average for Wales (84%). Only 65% of 16 year olds carry on in full-time education. This is also much lower than the national average (75%) and lower than the average for Gwent (71%). Of the learners who go on to study full-time after the age of sixteen, just over half (58%) go to the further education college and the rest stay on in a school sixth form. A lower than average proportion enters work-based learning (about 10%). An additional 10% go directly into employment without training. Overall, too many young people in the area fail to enter education, training or employment at the age of sixteen.
- 49 The lack of participation of young men in full-time education is a cause of concern. Only around 55% of the young men aged 16 in the area (70% for Wales) continue into full-time education, compared to 75% of young women (80% for Wales).
- 50 Learners in Blaenau Gwent have a reasonable choice of education and training routes when they reach the age of sixteen. They can stay in a small, academic sixth form or go to the further education college's local campus at Ebbw Vale. They also have the option to travel outside the borough to other campuses of Coleg Gwent for a wider choice of academic and vocational courses. Alternatively, they can undertake work-based learning, often out of the borough. Although this choice serves many learners adequately, overall, too many young people in the area do not participate in the education and training routes available to them.
- 51 The sixth forms in the borough are small. One sixth form has only around 60 learners and the rest have about 120 learners each. They offer a small number and narrow range of A level and vocational courses. The choice of courses on offer varies from 11 A level subjects in Nantyglo to 19 in Brynmawr, mainly in A levels

that continue the study of National Curriculum subjects. The schools also offer one or two vocational courses post –16 at levels 2 or 3.

- 52 The schools work together to maintain this choice where student numbers are particularly low. There are well- established collaborative arrangements between Ebbw Vale and Tredegar Comprehensive schools. More limited collaboration exists between Nantyglo Comprehensive School and Brynmawr Foundation School. All of these collaborative arrangements involve students travelling between sites. None of the borough's schools is currently involved in piloting the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification.
- 53 In 2004, about 260 learners moved up from Year 11 into one of the sixth forms. This is about 41% of the Year 11 learners in those schools. This is below the average for Wales, where about half the Year 11 cohort moves into the sixth form. The proportion of young men who move up is also much lower than young women (31% compared to 51%). Overall, the lower-than-average recruitment into the sixth forms reflects the lower attainment of pupils at GCSE in the borough. It also reflects the fact that the school sixth forms tend to recruit most of the students that gain 5 or more A-C grades at GCSE. Once in the sixth form, learners stay on from Year 12 to Year 13 in line with the national average (78%).
- 54 Coleg Gwent offers a wide range of vocational and academic courses and provides good opportunities for progression and accreditation. Qualifications are available at all levels. There are 44 A level and 47 AS level courses across all the campuses. The A level courses include all those available in most school sixth forms, but there are also A levels in accounting, electronics, environmental science, geology, law, music technology, philosophy, psychology and sociology. There are four modern foreign languages on offer (French, German, Spanish and Japanese). The college is a provider of Learndirect programmes. The Welsh Baccalaureate was successfully introduced as a pilot programme at the Ebbw Vale campus last year (one level 2 group in Health and Social Care) and the outcomes were very good.
- 55 This wide range of options is not available at all the college campuses. The widest range is available at the Crosskeys campus. At the Ebbw Vale campus there is a suitable range of vocational courses covering most programme areas, including a range of Open College Network qualifications in vocational skills at different levels. The campus offers a few A level subjects, mainly in subjects not covered by school sixth forms in the area, for example psychology, law, media studies and film studies. The college decided to discontinue some vocational courses recently where enrolments were low, for example in Engineering and Catering at the Ebbw Vale campus. However, the college has also strengthened its provision by extending craft skills courses in Construction and Hairdressing and Beauty courses on the campus and by creating some centres of excellence, for example in Construction at the Pontypool campus. As a result, some students from the area travel to access this specialist vocational provision.
- 56 School sixth forms mainly offer a limited range of A level courses which continue the study of National Curriculum subjects. The choice of courses on offer varies from 11 A level subjects in Nantyglo to 19 in Brynmawr. The schools also offer one or two vocational courses post-16 at levels 2 or 3. The schools work together to maintain

this choice where student numbers are particularly low. There are well-established collaborative arrangements between Ebbw Vale and Tredegar Comprehensive Schools where they share the teaching of mathematics, music, and Welsh. The teaching of chemistry, physics, design and technology, and theatre studies to students from both schools takes place at Ebbw Vale Comprehensive. More limited collaboration exists between Nantyglo Comprehensive School and Brynmawr Foundation School. All these collaborative arrangements involve students travelling between sites.

- 57 In order to broaden the choice of subjects available, students from the four school sixth forms can study A levels in law, psychology, and media studies at the Ebbw Vale campus of Coleg Gwent, mainly in the evening. Some of the schools also offer an additional A level in the evening themselves. These arrangements can lead to students working a long day.
- 58 There are only two work-based learning providers with premises in Blaenau Gwent. Over thirty other providers offer learning programmes at various places of employment inside and outside the borough. Providers offer training in Modern Apprenticeship, Foundation Modern Apprenticeship, Skillbuild and Preparatory programmes. The overall trend is for most learners to undertake training in the retail sector or in engineering and manufacturing. ELWa's regional statement of needs and priorities identifies construction and hospitality as key areas for training. However, few learners take up work-based learning opportunities in these areas.
- 59 Many work-based learning companies provide training programmes designed to engage learners who are particularly disadvantaged. Often these companies operate open-entry policies, and in a few instances they provide free transport to promote access and reduce disadvantage. In the best practice, companies work effectively with other partners and organisations to support the widening participation agenda.
- 60 Overall, however, the provision in work-based learning varies too much in quality. It is difficult to engage all of the out-of-county providers in strategic consultative groups within the local area network. The borough has a large proportion of small to medium-sized employers and their involvement in planning groups is also limited. Overall, there are not enough opportunities for learners to progress to level 2 and 3 programmes in work-based learning within the borough.
- 61 In the college, there is substantial provision for the development of students' basic and key skills at level 1 to level 3. This provision is steadily improving. Key skills staff provide valuable support to staff and learners, but the integration of key skills into courses still varies too much across the college. Most students in school sixth forms have a GCSE in mathematics and English. Where they do not, they are encouraged to re-sit these examinations. Overall, there are not enough opportunities for students in school sixth forms to achieve level 3 qualifications in the key skills. There is good provision for developing key skills in courses below level 1 in many work-based settings, but there are not enough opportunities for learners to gain key skills qualifications at the higher levels required for the successful completion of their full training frameworks.

- 62 The school sixth forms provide good personal and social education for their students including a range of extra-curricular activities, such as educational visits, charity events and buddy schemes for students to help younger pupils with their reading. In a few school sixth forms, inadequate sport and leisure facilities reduce physical education and games opportunities for post-16 learners. In the college, opportunities for extra-curricular activities in most programme areas are not extensive enough. A few work-based learning companies offer trainees additional learning experiences to support their personal development. However, these experiences are not open to all learners. Limited funding is reducing these opportunities further.
- 63 Generally, the sixth forms offer learners good induction to study skills, but undeveloped resources for learning technology limit opportunities for learners to use their independent study skills. College staff have started to develop suitable interactive materials for a virtual learning environment, but these have yet to have a significant impact on the teaching of most courses.
- 64 In most school sixth forms, work experience is not compulsory and take-up is limited. In the college, work placement opportunities vary widely. They are good in some areas, for example in Construction and on the Welsh Baccalaureate courses. However, not all full-time learners have enough opportunities for work placements. Some school sixth forms promote education for sustainable development effectively through activities, such as participation in eco-school projects. However, few programme areas in the college do this well, though there are good examples of economic sustainability and recycling in Engineering.
- 65 School sixth forms, the further education college and work-based learning providers all have a limited bilingual ethos and very little bilingual provision. In general, they do not promote the Welsh language as an important employment skill or do enough to raise learners' awareness of Welsh culture. Most providers have too few opportunities for learners to be taught or assessed in Welsh.

Key question 4: How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?

Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

- 66 In the further education college and the sixth forms, most learners follow a programme of timetabled tutorial activities and one-to-one support. This often helps learners to develop a positive approach to learning and encourages them to complete their courses. However, the teachers in some sixth forms do not develop the independent learning skills of students fully enough, for example through research tasks, group work and problem solving. The quality of tutorials varies too much within the further education college and, overall, they do not support and develop learners' progress through their courses enough. In work based learning, tutors provide effective guidance and support for learners.
- 67 In the college, all full-time and some part-time learners take part in a diagnostic screening and assessment process when they start in order to identify any basic skills needs. The college prioritises support on the basis of need and allocates

resources appropriately. In the main, this is an effective process and a high proportion of full-time learners who need extra help receive it. There is a lot of investment in learning support within the classroom. Teachers encourage learners to attend workshop sessions to address any learning difficulties. The take-up of this support is good. Teachers use information from initial and diagnostic assessment appropriately to help them plan their teaching strategies. The college provides good support and guidance for an increasing number of asylum seekers.

- 68 In the sixth forms, there are only a few learners with additional learning needs. The schools identify their needs appropriately and support them effectively by using specialist teaching staff and learning support assistants. Most post-16 learners with a statement of special educational needs are taught well in the independent living unit at the college's Ebbw Vale campus. Learners with more complex additional needs attend Pen-y-Cwm Special School where provision for the support, guidance and welfare of pupils is very good.
- 69 Work-based learning providers assess learners appropriately when they start their training programmes. However, trainers do not always use the information effectively to develop suitable individual learning plans or identify additional learning needs. In the best practice, learners with additional support needs usually receive good one-to-one support from assessors, but they do not always receive appropriate specialist support, for example, to improve their basic skills. Some work-based learning providers do not record or meet the additional learning needs of trainees systematically.
- 70 After the identification of learners' needs, teachers refer learners to alternative sources of information, guidance and support. In many work-based learning providers, not enough employed trainees are fully aware of the availability of other support services, such as counselling and careers guidance. In the college, learners have good access to well-advertised support services for help with finance and childcare. The take-up of financial support by learners is good overall. The college, local education authority and other partner organisations subsidise a transport scheme to bus learners between college and school sites.
- 71 Generally, providers and Careers Wales Gwent support learners well in finding employment. In schools and the college, the guidance provided is generally effective and ensures that learners make appropriate course choices to help them to pursue their intended careers or employment. The majority of learners understand the opportunities available for future education, training or employment. However, some learners in work-based learning are less clear about how they might progress through their qualifications.
- 72 Schools and the college provide prospective learners with booklets that are informative and give clear guidance on the courses available. Generally, there are clear entry requirements for courses, but these vary too much between schools and the campuses of the college, and between various A level subjects within the college itself. In some cases, this unnecessarily restricts the choices of learners.
- 73 Providers in all sectors have general induction programmes for learners entering post-16 courses and training that are of good quality. In schools, the 'Compact'

agreements with University of Wales Institute Cardiff and the University of Glamorgan prepare learners well for the transition between school and higher education. In the college and most work-based learning providers, there is limited information on opportunities for learning and assessment through the medium of Welsh. Generally, providers manage induction procedures well and this helps most learners to settle into their courses or training programmes and understand what is expected of them.

- 74 Overall, attendance is reasonable throughout the different sectors. However, some teachers within the college and within half of the schools do not monitor the punctuality and attendance of learners rigorously enough. In the college, managers do not have easy access to data for monitoring overall patterns of attendance and punctuality. There is not enough sharing of attendance data between the college and schools in the collaborative A level courses. Schools record attendance on the basis of half-day sessions, whereas the college records attendance at individual classes. This difference limits the comparability of attendance data between the sectors.
- 75 Generally, procedures for reporting on the attainment and progress of learners are good. Parents receive progress reports from the college and schools twice a year. Overall, these are helpful and give a good indication of learners' progress. However, on collaborative courses, teachers from the college and the schools do not work closely enough on their contributions to learners' reports.
- 76 Staff and learners are well aware of health and safety issues in all providers. Schools and the college have suitable procedures for the protection of young learners. However, most work-based learning providers do not have adequate policies and procedures for the protection of all young people and vulnerable adults in their care.
- 77 All providers have appropriate policies relating to equality of opportunity and the recognition of diversity, but their monitoring of the effectiveness of these policies is often weak. Most work-based learning providers collect a range of data in relation to gender, ethnicity and disability as part of their contractual arrangements with ELWa. However, not enough providers use the information available to them to monitor performance and set targets for improvement in relation to the take-up of training opportunities by under-represented groups.

The quality of leadership and management

Key Question 5: How effective are leadership and strategic management?

Grade 4: Some good features but shortcomings in important areas

- 78 The local Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCET) has helped to develop better relationships, closer collaboration and improved understanding between providers in the area. The CCET established a 14-19 local area network in July 2004. Since then, it has put into place common goals and priorities, agreed a development plan, continued the more collaborative culture within the area and shown a sound level of leadership. The local education authority and the college have collaborated particularly well in the local partnership and there has been effective liaison with ELWa.
- 79 The local area network established a Memorandum of Understanding for providers in the area in January 2005. This included an agreed statement of the vision and mission of providers in the area as well as a decision-making structure. Overall, schools, the local education authority and the college have shown a serious-minded, conscientious involvement in strategic partnerships. However, developments on the ground have tended to focus on extending choice for learners rather than improving the quality of what is on offer. The involvement of employers and work-based learning providers is relatively weak.
- 80 The main outcome for learners as a result of closer collaboration between providers in the area is an increase in the range of A level options for school sixth formers. This has resulted from greater collaboration between schools and between schools and the Ebbw Vale campus of the college.
- 81 The collaboration between the four schools and the Ebbw Vale campus has improved greatly, but only recently has it extended to detailed arrangements, such as attendance of college staff at parents' meetings in the schools. In the case of Tredegar and Ebbw Vale schools, these arrangements build on a long tradition of collaboration. In the case of Brynmawr and Nantyglo schools, the collaboration is weak and less energetically pursued.
- 82 The college has supported the local area partnership by offering the A level courses to school sixth formers on the Ebbw Vale campus after school hours. The schools have supported this by funding the transport arrangements required. Overall, the arrangements have worked for the benefit of post-16 learners in the schools.
- 83 The local education authority has rationalised the provision of places in the primary school sector and also in secondary schools over recent years. Last year, it attempted to merge two schools with sixth forms together, but the proposals were withdrawn after vocal local opposition.
- 84 There continue to be major issues in relation to the cost-effectiveness, value for money and viability of the school sixth forms, especially given the high proportion of

surplus places in some areas of the borough, the small class sizes in the sixth forms, and the trend towards falling school rolls. There are no detailed plans or quantifiable targets for improving this situation within the local education authority, the CCET or within the local area network development plan.

- 85 In the schools with sixth forms, apart from Tredegar, there is a significant degree of cross-subsidy from key stage 3 and key stage 4 towards the sixth form provision. In effect, the funding for these key stages helps to sustain the uneconomic sixth form provision. This conflicts with the overall objective of the local education authority, which is to direct funds towards early intervention in order to improve pre-16 standards in the longer term.
- 86 There has been some uncertainty over the exact details of ELWa's plans for funding sixth form provision. The arrangements and projected timescales have changed on a number of occasions. However, the local education authority and secondary schools have not analysed closely the full implications of the new funding model for post-16 education and training and what this might mean for the future of the sixth form provision. Nevertheless the local education authority and head teachers are now beginning to engage with the long-term issues in relation to funding.
- 87 The development of 'The Learning Campus' project in Ebbw Vale has taken longer than anticipated and its original scale has been reduced recently in the interests of viability and sustainability. However, while more limited in scale, the project's vision remains the same and is now more achievable. The new plans have encouraged fuller engagement by some stakeholders than the previous proposals. It remains a major project aimed at improving the provision for post-16 learners, but exact details and the timescale for its implementation are unclear. The inspectors were not shown any contingency plans in the event of the project falling through.
- 88 The local partners have worked well in developing the project. However, it has led to some inactivity in the mid-term in planning the development of 16-19 provision, as the project has tended to dominate all discussion about the future of post-16 provision. To some extent, the five-year arrangements for lessening the impact of the move to a new model for funding post-16 provision have added a degree of inertia in tackling the issues. Overall, there is a lack of robust planning in determining improvements to 16-19 provision in the interim five-year period before the establishment of 'The Learning Campus'.
- 89 Overall, as separate institutions, providers have appropriate development and business plans in place. Schools and the college focus more sharply on learners' outcomes and the success of courses and programmes than most work-based learning providers. Overall, there is more of a benchmarking culture within the schools and the college than within work-based learning. In work-based learning providers, the focus is more on meeting business objectives and ELWa contractual requirements and not enough on improving standards and quality for the learner.
- 90 Most work-based learning providers are located outside the borough and the employers within the borough are predominantly small in scale, with little capacity to support training. Overall, the local area network has found it difficult to engage fully with work-based learning providers and employers in the development of its ideas

and action plans.

- 91 The small size of the borough means that there is a significant amount of out-of-county provision for 16-19 learners. As a result, it is then difficult for the local partnership to secure a full understanding of everything that influences and relates to its 16-19 residents. This limits the capacity of the local area network to monitor the performance of learners and for placing providers on the list of menu options available to learners at 16.
- 92 ELWa is well informed about developments in the area and is well represented on various strategic partnership groups. It has recently begun to consider how best to facilitate planning and co-operation across the five local area networks that link with Coleg Gwent. However, at present, ELWa does not have enough cross-boundary mechanisms in place for a small borough such as Blaenau Gwent to forge the links necessary to plan, monitor and influence all of the provision that is available to its learners.
- 93 The number of work-based learning providers operating within the borough is high and the overall quality is too low. ELWa has tended to provide contracts to providers even where the quality of training has been consistently low. New training providers can also appear suddenly within the borough who may have had little access to the strategic planning of the CCET or local area network. They would therefore have little understanding of the agreed strategic framework or memorandum of understanding that have been agreed locally. ELWa does not always make the local area network aware enough of the rationale for allocating contracts to new providers in the area.
- 94 The further education college is represented on the CCET and the local area network through its campus manager at Ebbw Vale. However, the college as a whole covers five different CCETs and local area networks within its catchment area and there are five different local area representatives on its governing body. The mechanisms for involving local area networks and CCETs in the overall curriculum development of the college are somewhat fragmented and there are difficulties in getting individual local planning groups to engage fully with the college developments as a whole.
- 95 Transport arrangements are important for learners in the area, especially for the majority who travel to the college campuses at Crosskeys and Ebbw Vale, as well as for work-based learners who have to travel to workplaces inside and outside the borough. The local education authority and the college spend significant amounts of money (just over £1m) on providing transport for post-16 learners. However, there are some inequalities for learners within the system and little joint strategic planning of transport arrangements has taken place in the past which might help to engage learners more easily with education and training opportunities. However, the CCET has recently established a sub-group to look at transport arrangements and the county borough has appointed a strategic transport manager.

Key question 6: How well do leaders and managers evaluate and improve quality and standards?

Grade 3: Good features outweigh shortcomings

- 96 Overall, the systems for assuring quality are reasonable across most of the different sectors. Schools and the college are increasingly using peer assessment to support the monitoring of quality and to inform institutional self-evaluation, but this is less developed in the work-based learning providers.
- 97 The systems for self-evaluation in the further education college are good, although there is some inconsistency in how they are applied on different campus sites. The college does not share examples of good practice enough. The self-evaluation of functional areas within the college, such as estates and human resources, has developed reasonably well in the last few years.
- 98 The arrangements for self-evaluation in schools are reasonable. There has been a steady improvement in learners' examination results at A level. There are systematic arrangements in place for monitoring standards and the quality of education. These include teachers and managers observing lessons. Departmental reviews are often rigorous and provide clear feedback on strengths and areas for improvement. Senior managers use the process of performance management to set individual targets for teachers and link these to staff development opportunities.
- 99 Overall, the college produces a good range of useful data on learner outcomes and managers use national benchmarks well to inform their evaluation of quality. However, the quality of the analysis varies too much across individual programme areas. Schools also use national and local benchmark data well in evaluating quality. However, the college and the schools use different value-added models for measuring the progress of A level learners. Currently, there are also different systems for defining and presenting data on how well learners complete their courses and attain their qualifications. The move to a unified data system in the future will aid comparability between the two sectors, but there is a lack of comparability in the short term.
- 100 Many work-based learning providers have weak quality systems and too many struggle to produce robust data to inform effective self-evaluation. Most providers collect data to monitor contractual and financial targets, but they do not focus enough on data linked to quality improvements and learner progression.
- 101 The college uses a mixture of learner perception questionnaires and learner focus groups to gather the views of learners on the quality of courses and on college life in general. The outcomes from these quality probes provide the college with important feedback from key stakeholders which is used to set targets for improvement. Schools do not routinely involve learners in the self-evaluation process. However, a few schools have identified opportunities for existing student groups, for example school councils, to contribute to self-evaluation activities. In work-based learning, feedback from stakeholders, particularly employers, is limited. Too often companies rely on poorly designed questionnaires as their only source of feedback.

- 102 The standard of the college's self evaluation report is good. It is honest and evaluative. It reflects contributions from all areas and levels of staff within the college. It includes development plans for improving quality that are specific, measurable and realistic. Schools produce appropriate annual development plans as well as departmental plans. The best are analytical and honest in their evaluation of standards and provision. Different schools use different formats of self-evaluation reports. The lack of a common format makes it difficult for schools, the local education authority and the local area network to compare the findings systematically. Schools generally receive little feedback on their self-evaluation reports from the local education authority. Too many work-based learning providers produce weak self-evaluation reports. Some do not routinely produce a self-evaluation report each year. The quality of the action plans that result from self-evaluation is often unsatisfactory.
- 103 The local education authority produced a self-evaluation report for this inspection using the common inspection framework. The report contains grades for each key question and draws on evidence from across all sectors to support its judgements on performance, using previous inspection reports and a range of data sources. The quality of the report is reasonable, but the grades are too generous.
- 104 Overall there is some sound and developing practice across the post-16 sector that is supporting the drive towards continuous improvement. However, there is still some way to go in terms of sharing best practice and securing consistency in evaluating quality and standards in education and training provision within the area. Without a shared approach to managing, promoting and evaluating quality it is difficult for leaders and managers in the area to compare the effectiveness of local provision.

Key question 7: How efficient are leaders and managers in using resources?

Grade 4: Some good features but shortcomings in important areas

- 105 Overall, staff are well qualified and experienced. However, in the college and work-based learning providers, there is a shortage of qualified staff to deliver basic skills. In general, staff are well motivated and committed to helping learners achieve relevant qualifications and occupational skills. Generally, staff are appropriately deployed to meet the needs of most learners. In schools and work-based learning providers, staff development is mostly good. However, the college does not have a well-developed plan to support staff development. Most providers support staff well who wish to take up further qualifications.
- 106 Accommodation and facilities in the four sixth forms vary too much. In the best cases, there are suitable study areas for sixth form learners that are near libraries with networked computers. School libraries are usually pleasant, but the number and range of books for sixth form study is too small. Schools do not use the intranet enough for lesson notes and study materials. In two schools, sixth formers do not have adequate study facilities and must find empty classrooms or use the canteen area. Recreational facilities for sixth form learners also vary too much. Some common rooms are uninviting or too cold.

- 107 At the college, there have been major improvements in accommodation and facilities on most campuses, especially in relation to the learning resource centres at Newport and Pontypool. The college has recently improved the accommodation for Hair and Beauty and for craft skills on the Ebbw Vale campus. However, there has been less investment recently on the campuses that mostly directly affect Blaenau Gwent learners, namely Crosskeys and Ebbw Vale. Recreational facilities for learners on these campuses are also limited.
- 108 Many work-based learning providers offer learners work placements of good quality, often out of the borough. These provide learners with challenging and realistic experiences. However, very few work-based learning providers collaborate to offer opportunities for learners to attend courses or off-the-job training at a centre within the locality.
- 109 The schools are improving their learning technology facilities and this is beginning to improve the independent study of post-16 learners, but from a relatively low base in most schools. In work-based learning providers, the quality and amount of up-to-date learning resources varies too much between providers, especially in relation to internet access to support independent learning. However, the amount and range of learning technology in the college is generally good and has improved greatly over the last few years.
- 110 Many premises across the sectors are difficult to access by users with restricted mobility, as required by the Disability Discrimination Act. Action is underway in many providers to address this, particularly in relation to the most pressing needs, but progress towards addressing all requirements is slow.
- 111 All the sixth forms are small. They range in size from 60 to about 120. There are a high proportion of small classes (less than 10 learners). Projections based on ELWa's proposed post-16 funding model suggest that the school sixth forms may lose a significant level of funding. Even so, there has not been enough robust analysis of the cost effectiveness and financial viability of the sixth form provision and the impact of these small classes on the funding available to the rest of the school. The collaborative courses at A level are an attempt to secure greater cost effectiveness while also extending learner choice. However, the selection of courses and departments is not informed enough by considerations of quality. At present, there has not been any detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of the collaborative arrangements between schools and between the schools and the college.
- 112 Although funding for sixth forms is in line with their size, the time teachers spend teaching the sixth form compared to the rest of the school is disproportionately high. There is also a significant number of surplus places (35%) within the Nantyglo and Blaina area of the borough, which will add further pressure on the achievement of viability and value for money. The local education authority's self-evaluation report does not refer to value for money judgements.
- 113 In the college, strategic, operational and financial planning have improved, and the college is tackling some urgent structural weaknesses in its finances, mainly in relation to its estates and teaching costs. It achieves reasonable value for money.

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Work-based learning providers achieve unsatisfactory value for money as their outcomes are too weak. Work-based learning providers do not systematically analyse and use data to inform their judgements about value for money. However, recent data shows a slightly improved picture.

Appendix: Evidence base for the inspection

Five HM Inspectors spent a total of 75 inspector days inspecting standards and the quality of provision of education and training for residents in Blaenau Gwent aged 16-19.

The inspection team included two nominees: a senior partnership development manager for the area employed by ELWa and the CCET project manager employed by the local education authority.

The inspectors considered:

- the evidence from previous Estyn inspections of all relevant providers, including lesson observation forms, general evaluation forms, analysis of data on standards and progress, published reports and registered files;
- documents from ELWa, including the Regional Statement of Needs and Priorities, Baseline Data and Intelligence, and Geographical Review and Action Plan
- local plans and strategies, including the Community Plan, School Organisation Plan, Network Development Plan, the agendas and minutes of meetings of the local CCET and local area network, including their sub-groups;
- data on learner outcomes provided by ELWa in relation to the 16-19 residents of the borough, including information on the rates at which learners complete and attain their qualifications and training frameworks;
- data provided from all providers on current enrolments and value-added data provided by the schools, the local education authority and the college; and
- self-evaluation reports from the schools, the college, work-based learning providers and the local education authority.

Members of the team had meetings with:

- representatives from providers prior to the inspection to explain the inspection process and to respond to any questions;
- senior managers in the four schools with sixth forms, the vice principal of the college and the campus managers at the Crosskeys and Ebbw Vale campuses, managers at a sample of work-based learning providers covering a cross-section of occupational routes;
- 16-19 learners at the four sixth forms, the college campuses at Crosskeys and Ebbw vale and at a sample of work-based training providers;

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- managers with specific responsibility for the area within ELWa, the local education authority, Careers Wales Gwent and members of the local area network and CCET; and
- representatives from providers at the end of the inspection to feedback the provisional findings and to respond to any questions.