



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

A report on

**Bridgend County Borough Council
Civic Offices
Angel Street
Bridgend
CF31 4WB**

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by

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

About Bridgend County Borough Council

Bridgend County Borough Council is located in South Wales and has a total population of 144,288. The local authority maintains 60 schools. There are 48 primary schools, including four that provide Welsh-medium education. There are nine secondary schools including one Welsh-medium school. In addition, there are two special schools and a pupil referral unit.

The interim chief executive took up his post in January 2019 and the corporate director for education and family support was appointed in March 2017. The council leader has been in his role since October 2016 and the main portfolio holder for education services took up this position in May 2017. The local authority's last inspection was in October 2012.

Bridgend is one of five local authorities in the Central South Consortium joint education service for school improvement.

In 2018-2019, the Council's net education budget is approximately £108 million. The delegated school budget per pupil is the fifth lowest of all local authorities in Wales.

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

- Over a three year average, 18.1% of pupils aged five to fifteen are eligible for free school meals, slightly higher than the Wales average of 17.9%
- 7.7% of pupils aged five and over are fluent in Welsh, which is lower than the Wales average of 16.2%
- 6.0% of pupils are from ethnic minorities, lower than the Wales average of 11.0%
- 20.2% of pupils have special educational needs, lower than the Wales average of 22.6%
- 131 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2018, which is higher than the Wales average of 102 children per 10,000

Summary

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for education in Bridgend. The authority's approach of collaborative working across services areas and with schools, known as 'Team Bridgend', is effective, in particular in improving support for vulnerable learners. Schools are integral to decision-making processes about education. The local authority's allocation of resources to its education services and schools reflects the high priority given to education in the corporate plan.

Overall, pupils in Bridgend make good progress between the statutory school ages of five and sixteen. Standards at key stage 4 in secondary schools over the last three years compare well with those in similar local authorities. However, standards in sixth forms in schools compare less favourably with the national average. Outcomes for primary-aged pupils are not as strong as for those in secondary schools, particularly in literacy. Across the local authority, children and young people make a very positive contribution to influencing decisions that affect them. The local authority provides them with well-structured processes and activities and they engage well.

School improvement officers in the local authority work well with officers and advisers from the regional consortium to support schools to improve. This support is generally effective, although the pace of progress in schools causing concern is too slow. The local authority has a strong commitment to meeting the needs of pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties and provides a good range of services to support schools and pupils.

The authority's self-evaluation process is well established across the directorate, and takes good account of contributions from its stakeholders, including school leaders and pupils. This enables managers to evaluate the quality of services, taking into account a wide range of perspectives.

Recommendations

- R1 Raise standards of literacy in primary schools
- R2 Improve outcomes for post-16 learners in sixth forms
- R3 Increase the pace of improvement in schools causing concern
- R4 Strengthen the role of the Welsh Education Strategic Forum to ensure timely progress in delivering the priorities identified in the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan

What happens next

Following the publication of the inspection report, the local authority should update its plans to address the recommendations and to take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority should update its plans within three months of the publication of the inspection report.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare a case study on its work in relation to young people's involvement in decision-making processes in schools and the local authority, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Outcomes

Overall, pupils in Bridgend make good progress between the statutory school ages of five and sixteen. Standards at key stage 4 in secondary schools over the last three years compare well with those in similar local authorities, including standards in English or Welsh and mathematics. The proportion of pupils who achieve five A* or A grades or equivalent is considerably higher than in similar local authorities.

Over the last three years, the proportion of primary schools that are judged by Estyn inspectors to have at least good standards is below the average in Wales. In particular, inspectors have often noted weaknesses in pupils' literacy skills in primary schools.

Pupils who are eligible for free school meals perform well compared to those in similar authorities and the average in Wales. Pupils with special educational needs perform broadly in line with the average in Wales. The progress of other vulnerable groups of pupils, for whom reliable information exists, is usually at least in line with national averages. However, young offenders do not make enough progress in their education.

Standards in sixth forms in schools, particularly when taking account of pupils' prior attainment, compare less favourably with the national average. The proportion of pupils achieving the level 3 threshold has been slightly above the Wales average for the last three years. However, the average wider points score and the proportion of pupils achieving three A* or A grades are lower than the national averages, and the gap in performance when compared with the national average has been widening over the last three years.

A small proportion of young people develop useful skills and achieve nationally recognised accreditations through activities provided in non-formal settings by youth support services.

Over the last three years, the proportion of Year 11 leavers known not to be in education, employment or training has almost halved, and, at the end of 2017, was broadly in line with the Wales average. Vulnerable pupils have benefited greatly from the valuable range of projects offered across the local authority to support them, contributing to this reduction. For example, a five-week summer holiday programme for key stages 3 and 4 pupils is linked to the 'Inspire to Achieve' project run successfully by youth workers with external partners such as Careers Wales. Through early identification, these projects help to keep pupils at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training motivated and engaged. This engagement includes, for example, enjoying the range of activities offered in the summer programme from quad biking through to music workshops, where pupils develop important life skills such as team working and reliability. Nevertheless, at the end of 2017, a higher proportion of the local authority's Year 11 pupils' destinations on leaving school was unknown compared with the national average.

Attendance in primary schools has remained above the Wales average for the last three years, while the rate in secondary schools has been either in line or above this average for the same period. In both primary and secondary schools, the percentage of pupils who are persistent absentees is below the Wales average for the last three years. The attendance of vulnerable groups compares favourably with local and national averages over this same period.

The number of permanent exclusions has increased over the last three years. In 2017, 12 pupils were permanently excluded from primary and secondary schools, which represents a higher rate than the national average. The rate of fixed-term exclusions of five days or less is below the Wales average for two out of the last three years, but the rate of more than five days is above it for these three years.

Across the local authority, children and young people make a very positive contribution to influencing decisions that affect them made by their schools and the local authority. The local authority provides them with well-structured processes and activities and they engage well. Young people know their contribution is valued and makes a difference. For example, the youth council has taken the lead for the local authority addressing 'period poverty' through its schools. Members of the council worked with local authority officers to design, conduct and analyse a survey across all schools on this aspect, and they presented their findings in a written report for elected members. As a result, posters have been distributed to every school in the local authority and free sanitary products made available.

Across the local authority, children and young people benefit from useful opportunities to develop healthy and safe attitudes. For example, in 2018, the local authority early years and childcare team piloted the Welsh Government funded 'school holiday enrichment programme' for vulnerable groups in primary schools. The three-week programme included daily healthy meals, which parents, carers and families attended one day each week. This initiative, which the local authority plans to repeat and expand in 2019, helped children to improve their social skills and confidence, and strengthened family engagement.

The local authority puts into action beneficial strategies to improve children's and young people's mental and emotional health and wellbeing. These strategies include a youth mental health first aid programme, which is being rolled-out across all schools and the youth service, and community-based counsellors for youth support services in addition to school-based counsellors. The local authority's 'Festival of Learning' in 2018 brought together representatives from all school councils on the learners' forum day to consider 'What makes children happy in school?' These views are helping to inform decision-making in this area in individual schools and the local authority.

Education services

Under Inspection Area 2, Estyn sets local inspection questions that are relevant to each local authority. Local inspection questions focus on education services that relate to the local authority's current strategic priorities or result from information that Estyn has about education services in the local authority.

How robustly does the local authority challenge the performance of schools and ensure that schools receive appropriate support to help them improve?

School improvement officers in the local authority work well with officers and advisers from the regional consortium to support schools to improve. The 'Team Bridgend' approach introduced in 2017 emphasises collaborative working both between schools and between schools and local authority officers. It has established a collective responsibility for improving outcomes for all learners within the local authority. This approach has resulted in closer working amongst schools. For example, cluster schools work together to share effective practice and focus on a common issue such as boys' literacy or pupils' emotional wellbeing.

The local authority's 'School Improvement Group', consisting of senior officers and elected members, reviews schools causing concern regularly. They also take timely decisions about appropriate local authority intervention in these schools to bring about improvements by issuing, for example, warning notices or appointing temporary leaders and new governors. The local authority provides appropriate support to all non-maintained settings for children who are below statutory school age. However, this support is not available in Welsh for Welsh-medium nonmaintained settings.

In most cases, officers and challenge advisers know their schools well. They identify their strengths appropriately and provide effective support to help them to improve. However, in a few instances, challenge advisers working with schools have not recognised important shortcomings or the need for school leaders to make significant improvements.

There are a few primary schools in statutory categories following inspection. The local authority and the regional consortium provide support for these schools but the pace of improvement has been too slow. In these schools, while the local authority is dealing appropriately with issues about leadership and governance, important areas such as weak teaching take too long to improve. This has a negative impact on the progress that pupils in these schools make and the standards they achieve.

Challenge advisers undertake a good range of monitoring activities during their visits to schools. For example, they observe lessons, carry out learning walks, listen to learners and look at their books. In the most useful instances, they carry out this work with members of the school's leadership team in order to provide opportunities for meaningful discussion about the progress that pupils are making. This process identifies aspects of schools' work that need improvement. For example, a learning walk conducted by a challenge adviser identified the need to improve teaching in the foundation phase. As a result, school leaders focused well on this area and brought about improvements in a timely manner.

In schools that require additional help, challenge advisers plan support packages, which incorporate support from the specialist literacy and numeracy teams from the regional consortium. In addition, accelerated progress leads provide bespoke support for schools, for example to secondary school mathematics departments. Support programmes for schools focus appropriately on key areas for improvement such as improving reading and the quality of teaching. Although challenge advisers collect a good range of first hand evidence when they monitor this support, evaluations focus heavily on data and provision rather than the standards pupils achieve and the progress that they make.

How well does the local authority work with schools to improve the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals?

The local authority has identified improving the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals as a priority. Raising the attainment of this group of pupils is an objective in the education directorate business plan and reducing the gap in performance between pupils who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not is a strategy they share with the regional consortium. Officers track the gap in attainment over time of pupils at key stage 4 and set appropriate targets to reduce this. However, their emphasis on tracking and reducing the gap is not always useful as the gap can close due to the underperformance of pupils who are not eligible for free school meals. Overall, pupils who are eligible for free school meals perform well compared to those in similar authorities and the average in Wales.

Improving the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has also been a priority over the last three years. This focus has helped to raise the attendance levels of pupils eligible for free school meals in both primary and secondary schools to be above the average for Wales.

Challenge advisers work with schools to ensure that activities funded with the pupil development grant are designed well to meet the needs of pupils. They also help schools to share effective practice in the use of the grant. A few schools use the grant to provide enrichment opportunities for more able or talented pupils, for example to pay for music provision or sports equipment. However, overall the provision for more able pupils eligible for free school meals is limited.

In 2018, the local authority carried out a pilot programme to provide healthy meals, food and nutrition education and physical activity during the school summer holidays. Officers recognise the value of this programme in improving the wellbeing of pupils eligible for free school meals and are providing opportunities to deliver the programme to an increased number of children in 2019.

How effective are the local authority's strategies to improve outcomes for more able and talented young people?

Improving provision to support pupils who are more able and talented is a priority in the local authority, but their plans to improve outcomes for these pupils are at an early stage of development. Currently, they do not focus sharply enough on improving outcomes in primary schools or in supporting pupils' wellbeing across schools.

The proportion of pupils who achieve A* and A grades at the end of key stage 4 compares well with those in similar authorities. Officers and challenge advisers have a secure understanding of the secondary schools that support the attainment of more able pupils particularly effectively. In these schools, there are good processes for the clear and timely identification of pupils' strengths and the setting of rigorous targets. There is robust monitoring and tracking of pupils' progress. However, in the primary phase, officers and challenge advisers do not have a sufficiently accurate picture of the quality of provision or the progress more able and talented pupils make because they do not draw on a broad enough range of evidence when making their evaluations.

Many more able and talented pupils in sixth forms benefit from the local authority's involvement in the Seren network. This provides a helpful programme of support for high achievers across the region. Through the programme, the most able pupils attend academic workshops, listen to inspirational talks and receive support for university applications. This has helped to raise pupils' aspirations and to increase the number receiving offers to study in leading universities. Officers hold regular reviews in schools with sixth forms to analyse and discuss pupils' progress, and to challenge them to improve outcomes in particular subjects, such as science and mathematics. However, this has not led to sufficient or sustained improvements in the A level performance of more able pupils.

The Bridgend Music Service provides many worthwhile enrichment opportunities to nurture pupils' musical abilities including residential courses and expert teaching in various groups appropriate to their stage of development. The most talented pupils participate in regional and national events, such as the Urdd National Eisteddfod and the National Music for Youth Festival. These experiences build their confidence and help them to develop their performance skills to a high level. The music service student ambassador programme helps musicians to develop broader skills, including leadership, for example by conducting ensembles in rehearsals and concerts, and by mentoring younger musicians. The ambassadors plan and deliver events with external partners and community groups, which helps them to learn about arts administration and to develop beneficial team working, communication and organisational skills.

Recently, the local authority has developed an appropriate longer-term strategy to improve outcomes for more able and talented pupils, which takes good account of national initiatives. There are suitable collaborative arrangements in place with the regional consortium to progress actions. These include the roll out of a programme of professional learning for each cluster of schools to support those teachers with a whole-school responsibility for improving provision for pupils who are more able and talented.

Overall, the local authority does not communicate its strategy for improving provision and outcomes for this group of pupils sufficiently well. In many cases, schools are not clear that this is a directorate priority and they do not know what support is available to them. In general, across the local authority, very few schools share what works well in improving provision for more able and talented pupils.

How well does the local authority meet the needs of learners with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties?

The local authority has a strong commitment to meeting the needs of pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties and provides a good range of services to support schools and pupils. Officers work well with schools to identify the key areas they need to address and have improved processes and provision to meet the needs of these learners. However, their evaluation of the effectiveness of these services is at an early stage of development.

The Educational Psychology Service and the Behaviour and Wellbeing Team provide useful preventative strategies, training and support to schools. The local authority has strengthened the role of its pupil referral unit (PRU) and special school for pupils

with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties in supporting teachers in mainstream schools. This work makes a positive contribution to pupils' attendance and wellbeing across the authority.

The Vulnerable Groups Team provides a valuable single point of contact for schools with concerns over pupils' needs. This team provides consistent information and effective advice to schools about how to access services and training and supports the local authority's graduated response to pupils' needs well. The collaborative working relationship between the Vulnerable Groups Team and the Children's Social Care Service is a strength. In addition, the team's improved approach to working with other services, such as the Early Help Community Hubs, supports schools well to meet the needs of vulnerable learners effectively.

The local authority's Access to Education Panel provides a pivotal role in decisionmaking on placements and support for all vulnerable learners, including those with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. This process is a strength. The Director of Education and Family Support chairs the panel meetings, which involve a wide and relevant membership, including primary and secondary school representation. Schools are clear about the process for referral to panel and the transparent outcomes of panel decisions.

How well does the local authority support looked after children and young carers to make good progress in their learning?

There are around 300 school age pupils currently looked after by the local authority, a slight increase from the previous year. The Vulnerable Groups Team is the single point of contact for all agencies involved with looked after pupils. This team has strengthened the co-ordination of provision and staff training to support these pupils. For example, the team delivers the Children Looked After Friendly Schools programme to staff in all schools.

The local authority collects the attainment levels for looked after pupils in Years 11 and 13 and outcomes for pupils at Years 2, 6 and 9, based on statutory teacher assessments or external examinations. However, the local authority does not monitor, track and report effectively on the progress of looked after pupils. The present information system is not sufficiently sophisticated to support officers to evaluate progress from pupils' initial starting points and over time.

In January 2019, there were 218 known young carers in schools in Bridgend. The Vulnerable Groups Team has established good working relationships and information sharing with the Children's Social Care Service to provide relevant training and support to the schools that young carers attend. Young carers in secondary schools have an identity card that helps to give them a higher profile within their schools. School staff have started to do more to support the particular needs of this group of learners, for example by providing opportunities to complete homework in school. However, local authority officers do not have a strong enough understanding of the progress that young carers make or the impact of services on the outcomes that they achieve.

How effective is the local authority's work to improve school attendance and reduce exclusions?

The local authority has a strong focus on improving attendance and reducing exclusions. Its vision and priorities for attendance reflects the local context well. The strategy highlights the broad principles for improving attendance in Bridgend, the role of the local authority, the role of parents and the work of the education welfare officer. It also provides useful examples of multi-agency working in the authority, for example in undertaking truancy patrols.

Education welfare officers (EWOs) work effectively within Early Help Community Hubs. These hubs are located across Bridgend and support a multi-agency approach in ensuring that appropriate support is available for pupils and families. Other staff involved include social workers, police officers, behaviour support teachers and youth workers. EWOs visit schools regularly to identify and monitor pupils causing concern and agree appropriate follow-up actions with the school.

EWOs contribute well to effective 'Team around the School' group meetings. This group includes representatives from safeguarding, inclusion, police and youth justice. These monthly, school-based meetings are effective in identifying and responding to the needs of children and young people.

Attendance panel meetings involve parents, EWOs and school staff. They explore how to support and improve pupils' attendance and result in appropriate action plans which are monitored by the school. The Vulnerable Groups Team identify pupils causing concern in relation their attendance or behaviour at an early stage and intervene as needed.

Attendance in both primary and secondary schools compares well with that in similar local authorities. However, the work being undertaken in the authority on exclusions has not had sufficient impact on overall exclusion rates.

Leadership and management

Senior officers and elected members share a clear vision for ensuring effective education provision in Bridgend. They communicate this vision well across the local authority, throughout the directorate, and to stakeholders and partners. The local authority has identified three core priorities, which are clearly defined in its corporate plan. These priorities provide a sound base for the directorate's plan for improving education. The corporate plan reflects relevant national and local priorities well, including the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and takes good account of the local needs of children and young people.

The education and family support directorate business plan builds well upon the corporate plan and its priorities. The business plan, developed in partnership with schools, identifies a further three key priorities. These suitable priorities are reflected clearly in its team 'road maps', group plans, individual performance plans, and also in all school cluster plans.

Within the business plan, each objective has clearly defined progress indicators and measurable actions for improvement. Timescales are specific and realistic with lead

officer responsibilities clearly identified. Although actions contain limited incremental measures for tracking progress towards completion, the directorate and corporate monitoring systems provide good opportunities to identify slippage, or emerging risks.

The authority's self-evaluation process is well established across the directorate, and takes good account of contributions from its stakeholders, including school leaders and pupils. This enables managers to evaluate the quality of services, taking into account a wide range of perspectives. The outcomes from this process give managers and elected members good information about the work of the directorate and help managers to address issues raised and allocate resources appropriately. However, the authority does not always make best use of all of the information it has available and relies too much on headline outcome indicators.

The directorate has an effective working group structure, which brings a focused and collaborative approach to managing a wide range of issues. These groups enable officers to exchange information easily and seek collaborative solutions to emerging problems. For example, there is close monitoring of schools causing concern through the School Improvement Group, the resolution of issues for individual pupils through the Vulnerable Groups Team and emerging financial risks are considered by the financial monitoring board.

Although the authority's ruling political group does not have an overall majority, the effective cross-party working enables the authority to continue to deliver its strategy for education. Elected members have a good understanding of education issues and work well with officers to bring about improvement. Members are involved in the work of the directorate through regular engagement with many of the working groups.

Reports to elected members contain useful information and help elected members to understand the key issues. Officers generally present information to members clearly, for example performance data. However, the key implications arising from this information are not always highlighted clearly enough to help elected members focus on the most important issues.

The authority communicates well with its key stakeholders, including headteachers, parents and external agencies, and takes good account of their views. In particular, the authority has a culture of listening carefully to, and taking account of, the views of children and young people. The authority's participation strategy enables children and young people to influence effectively important issues and decisions. For example, large numbers of pupils in both primary and secondary schools contributed to the public consultation about future budget cuts across the local authority.

The local authority's approach of collaborative working across services areas and with schools, known as 'Team Bridgend', is effective. Schools are integral to decision-making processes about education. Headteachers contribute directly to planning, which means agreed actions meet headteachers' expectations. This helps the local authority to ensure its plans meet strategic objectives, and address emerging risks.

The local authority has a good relationship with the regional consortium, and contributes well to its management, governance and scrutiny. The inclusion of the consortium's lead challenge adviser within the local authority's senior management

team leads to regular dialogue about, and agreed responses to, school performance issues. Over time the local authority has worked well with the consortium to ensure its schools have the most appropriate challenge advisers working with them.

The education and family support directorate identifies well emerging and ongoing risks, and the risk management process effectively assesses and prioritises these. Risks identified as high are properly escalated through the corporate management structure and shared within the directorate and across the authority. Risks with financial implications are communicated appropriately to the corporate finance team.

The local authority has agreed principles that inform its school reorganisation and planning process. It has improved its approach to statutory consultation about school reorganisation, and it is now more effective in consulting with parents, pupils, staff and local communities. The local authority has also learned from recent experience, that they need to give greater consideration to the impact of new schools upon pupil numbers in neighbouring schools.

The local authority's delivery of its 2017-2020 Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) had a slow start. More recently, planning for increasing Welsh-medium provision has taken greater priority, and is gathering pace. The monitoring of the implementation of the WESP through the Welsh Education Strategic Forum has not been effective enough. Until recently, it had not met regularly enough to ensure that agreed actions take place in a timely manner.

The local authority's scrutiny arrangements were recently reviewed by the Wales Audit Office. They found that scrutiny is well run but needed to adapt to meet future challenges. The review proposed five areas for improvement, which were accepted by the local authority. The scrutiny committee for education has begun to adapt its work practice to take account of these.

Managers use the corporate performance management framework effectively to support and develop staff in their roles. There is a well-embedded cycle of performance review and timely reporting throughout the directorate. Staff feel valued and are clear about the outcomes they are expected to deliver in their roles.

The education and family support directorate manages complaints effectively. A new support unit has been established to co-ordinate responses. This has streamlined the process for complainants, and enables managers to review patterns of the concerns raised.

The directorate provides a wide range of professional learning opportunities for officers through the corporate Core Training Framework. Officers demonstrate a high level of commitment to their own professional development. Officers from individual service areas plan their own learning informed by their performance review and in line with service priorities. This results in a comprehensive range of opportunities that match well to staff needs. However, the directorate does not monitor fully the range and impact of training across all services.

The local authority's arrangements for safeguarding in education provision are appropriate and do not raise any cause for concern. Safeguarding issues relating to professional practice are managed well and reported as appropriate to senior managers. The local authority's leadership in safeguarding matters to its schools is good.

The local authority's allocation of resources to its education services and schools reflects the high priority afforded to education in the corporate plan. The authority has shown its commitment through taking decisions to protect schools' delegated budgets wherever possible at a time of budget reductions across other services.

The local authority has a sound corporate financial planning framework. The schools and authority work well together to understand the financial pressures they face in the short and medium term. There is regular and detailed monitoring of expenditure against budget within schools and in relation to budgets managed centrally within the local authority. Officers have a good knowledge of schools and understand the financial difficulties faced by schools. The local authority has used corporate contingency funding to address significant issues in the very few schools facing financial problems. The level of reserves held by schools is lower than in most authorities in Wales and, where necessary, an appropriate escalation process is in place to manage deficits.

The education directorate has a mixed track record in terms of achieving planned financial savings in recent years. Pressures in the inclusion and home-to-school transport budgets have also led to large overspends in the current financial year, potentially undermining savings being made elsewhere. There is an effective partnership with the School Budget Forum around the financing of schools, fostering a shared understanding across the authority that funding is distributed equitably to schools. The school funding scheme has been reviewed and updated over the last few months and the proposed changes are currently subject to consultation.

Copies of the report

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

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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