

Auditor General VFM study on Educational Consortia in Wales

The Welsh Government, in collaboration with the WLGA, has developed a National Model for Regional Working to support its approach that regional consortia should lead, orchestrate and co-ordinate improvement in the performance of schools and education of young people. It has secured a commitment from local authorities across Wales to support and help fund the consortia. The Auditor General for Wales has expressed concern that the governance and financial arrangements for the consortia may not be sufficiently clear and have the potential to hinder the intended developments and may fetter the ability of individual councils to exercise their accountability for standards in their schools.

The Auditor General has established a study, as part of his value for money studies programme to examine issues of governance and financial management across the four regional education consortia and to consider whether the consortia are well placed to respond to the Welsh Government's education policies. This work, to be carried out by the Wales Audit Office, will be delivered alongside the remit work that Estyn is undertaking in relation to the consortia during 2014-15. It will be reported to the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly for Wales.

Question

The study will consider:

Is the Welsh Government's approach to achieving improvements in education through regional education consortia (RECs) likely to deliver the intended benefits?

- Is the Welsh Government's approach to improvement through regional consortia clear and coherent?
- Are the regional consortia developing effective governance arrangements to enable them to deliver expectations?
- Is the Welsh Government putting in place arrangements to continuously evaluate and improve its approach?

Project Objectives

In addressing these questions the objectives of this study are to:

- To provide assurance that the arrangements for delivering education improvements in Wales are likely to provide effective governance and sound financial management.
- To identify and share good practice and areas for possible improvement to consortia financial and governance arrangements in the early stages of the implementation of the 'national model'.
- To support the Estyn thematic survey project for the Minister to evaluate the impact of school improvement services on outcomes for learners and to contribute to the development of an Inspection framework for regional educational consortia.

Methodology

The WAO project team will be led by Steve Martin under Alan Morris, Sector Lead for local government and criminal justice. The team will include specialists from relevant backgrounds.

ESTYN and WAO will design and undertake fieldwork jointly, sharing evidence and findings. Estyn will lead on school performance and assessing the effectiveness of consortia challenge, intervention, support and monitoring. The WAO study will focus on ensuring appropriate financial and governance arrangements are in place to ensure delivery of the agreed outcomes. The collaboration will seek to minimise disruption and duplication, but will also ensure that findings are aligned and coherent.

The methodology will include:

- Document and literature reviews including consortia financial and auditing arrangements, business plans and Welsh Government documents.
- Data and financial analysis
- Interviews (alongside Estyn) during autumn 2014 with key stakeholders in Welsh Government, local authorities and consortia and observation of relevant meetings.
- Identification of good practice and suggestions for improvement to be shared as early as possible (possibly via the Advisory Group).
- Ongoing feedback during the study to the Welsh Government and consortia.
- Report to the Public Accounts Committee (format to be determined at a later stage).

Current position

The scoping of the work is proceeding and will lead to an internal project initiation document (PID) for the study. On completion of the PID the Auditor General will confirm his intentions and inform the Welsh Government.

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Estyn's thematic survey of regional school improvement services 2014-2015

This briefing paper is intended to provide an overview of the survey for senior staff in regional school improvement services and local authorities. Please note that as we develop our planning further, some aspects of our approach may change.

Thematic survey scope

The purpose of the survey is to evaluate the work of regional school improvement services. Welsh Government guidance document 126/2014 '[National Model for Regional Working](#)' outlines the vision of regional school improvement consortia as well as the relative roles of each tier (schools, local authorities, and regional consortia) within the education system.

The areas to be covered include:

- Governance
- Management
- Roles and responsibilities of senior staff
- Relationship between regional service and local authorities, including scrutiny
- Strategic plans, business plans
- Performance management arrangements
- Risk-assessment
- Use of data
- School categorisation and how the criteria is used
- Targets setting
- Pupil tracking
- Funding
- Staffing
- Partnerships on the ground (links to initiatives and other agencies)
- Range of functions and their delivery in order to build school improvement capacity in the classroom and in leadership including
 - monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening in schools
 - school-to-school support
 - work on national priorities: poverty, literacy & numeracy
 - support for other aspects of provision (e.g. Foundation Phase, ICT, 14-19)
 - work with governors
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Impact

Wales Audit Office is carrying out a value for money study on regional consortia at the same time. Although separate pieces of work, Estyn and WAO will work closely together, carry out some joint fieldwork and share evidence and judgements in order to support each other's work.

Evidence:

Estyn will set up a Virtual Inspection Room (VIR) for each regional service to use as a depository for evidence.

The following is a list of evidence (not exhaustive) that is likely to be required:

- Consortia self-evaluations
- LA self-evaluations
- Consortia strategic plans
- Consortia business plans
- Consortia staffing structure (including staff profiles with responsibilities and named challenge adviser for every school)
- Minutes of relevant consortia internal meetings
- Latest categorisation for every school
- Relevant consortia policies
- Records of visits and reports for schools
- LA pre-inspection reports for schools and progress reports for schools in follow-up
- LA single integrated plans
- LA education plans
- LA staffing structure (including staff profiles with responsibilities)
- Reports to members (scrutiny and cabinet)
- Minutes of relevant LA internal meetings
- Communication between LA and consortia regarding individual schools
- Letters to schools re use of powers
- Plans for specific teams or projects
- Evaluations for specific teams or projects

Visits

A team of five HMI will visit each region. Mark Campion HMI, Estyn's sector lead for local authorities, will lead each team. Estyn's regional coordinators will be part of the team for the region they are linked to, as well as for at least one other region. The provisional dates for these visits are listed below:

- 10-13 November 2014 – South East Wales
- 24-27 November 2014 – Central South Wales
- 8-11 December 2014 – South West Wales
- 12-15 January 2015 – North Wales

Key on-site activity during visits to each regional service:

- Interview with managing director of consortia
- Interview with lead LA chief executive
- Interviews with two non-lead LA chief executive
- Interview with lead LA director
- Interviews with two non-lead LA directors
- Interview with lead council leader
- Interview(s) with hub lead officers or equivalents in consortia
- Interview with consortia lead officer(s) in consortia for literacy, numeracy and poverty
- Interview with each lead LA senior manager for consortia (i.e. 5 or 6 interviews)
- Focus group with Challenge Advisers (2 or 3 groups? by hub?)
- Focus groups with headteachers –details to be shared in the autumn
- Focus groups with chairs of governors – details to be shared in the autumn
- Chairs of recovery boards (where relevant)
- Possible interviews with chairs of scrutiny committee

- Possible interviews with other LA heads of service to discuss partnership with consortia beyond narrow school improvement work
- Possible interviews / focus groups of other consortia officers?

Feedback

Feedback will be provided informally during the visits but there will not be a formal feedback meeting. Once the final visit is complete, verbal feedback will be given as soon as possible to each of the regional services and to Welsh Government.

Report

The provisional structure for the report is as follows:

- **Background**

This may include a brief summary of policy development and guidance from the Welsh Government. It may include a historical account of the development of each of the regional services. It may also include contextual information about each region (e.g. geographical coverage, number of schools, number of pupils, levels of deprivation)

- **Performance across and within the regions**

This may be a 'state of the nation' view of performance in Wales at regional level (evaluation of key indicators with charts or graphs to help reader). It may also highlight the variation in performance within regions, again through evaluation and the use of charts or graphs.

- **Evaluation of regional services**

This would be the 'main findings' section of the report and cover:

- Leadership and management of regional school improvement services
- Use of data within regional school improvement services
- Delivery of regional school improvement services
- Impact of regional school improvement services
- Monitoring and evaluation

The report is likely to be published in late spring 2015.

Estyn contact

If you wish to discuss any aspect of the survey, please contact the lead inspector:

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Draft timetable for Estyn & WAO work on regional education consortia.

KEY:	Estyn	WAO	Estyn + WAO
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	Interview slot 1	Interview slot 2	Interview slot 3
MONDAY am	Team arrives		
12.00-12.45	LUNCH		
12.45-1.30	Welcome & briefing from consortia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • briefings re health & safety, security and domestic arrangements • introduction to the work of the consortia 		
1.30-5pm	Team meeting, interview preparation and scrutiny of documentation		
TUESDAY 9.00-10.00	Managing director of consortia	Lead chief executive	Lead council leader
10.15-11.15	Hub leads / principal challenge advisers or equivalents	Focus group: non-lead chief executives*	Focus group: non-lead council leaders*
11.30-12.30	Focus group: consortia leads for literacy, numeracy and poverty	Lead LA director	Focus group: chairs of scrutiny committees
12.30-1.15	LUNCH		
1.15-2.00	Lead senior managers (responsible for school improvement) from hub 1 LAs (or equivalent)	Focus group: non-lead LA directors*	Chairs of recovery boards (where relevant)
2.00-3.00	Lead LA director	Finance Manager for consortia	
3.00-5.00	Team meeting / preparation time		
WEDNESDAY 9.00-10.00	Focus group: LA senior managers for ALN,	Focus group: LA senior managers for HR or	Interview with Director of Finance and S151

	inclusion or wellbeing	governance	Officer for lead LA
10.15-11.30	Focus group: challenge advisers hub 1 (or equivalent)	Focus group: challenge advisers hub 2 (or equivalent)	Director of Finance and S151 Officer for up to three non- lead LAs*
11.30-12.30	Managing director of consortia (follow-up interview)		
12.30-1.15	LUNCH		
1.15-2.15	Focus group: Headteachers from hub 1	Focus group: Headteachers from hub 2	Monitoring Officer for lead LA
2.30-3.30	Focus group: available governors from schools represented by headteachers	Focus group: available governors from schools represented by headteachers (second group if necessary)	Monitoring Officer for non-lead LAs*
3.30-5.00	Team meeting / preparation time		
THURSDAY			
8..30-9.30	Lead senior managers (responsible for school improvement) from hub 2 LAs (or equivalent)	** Lead senior managers (responsible for school improvement) from hub 3 LAs (or equivalent)	Chair of Audit Comm and Cabinet member (Joint Committee member) for lead LA
9.45-10.45	** Focus group: challenge advisers hub 3 (or equivalent)	** Focus group: Headteachers from hub 3	Chair of Audit Comm and Cabinet member for up to three non-lead LAs*
10.45-12.00	Team meeting		
12.00-12.45	LUNCH		
1.15-2.00	Team meeting		
pm	Team leaves		

** For all 'non-lead' meetings, we are happy to meet as many as are available. For some groups we've limited the number of participants for practical purposes.*

*** In South East, there will only be two focus groups for headteachers and challenge advisers, so these sessions will not be applicable.*

Provisional questions for thematic survey on regional school improvement services

Governance and leadership
Governance models
Describe and compare across consortia.
How well are governance arrangements aligned with national and local governance arrangements and initiatives?
Management/committee structure
Describe and compare across consortia.
Are lines of accountability clear?
Are managements systems overly-bureaucratic or not organised enough?
Roles and responsibilities
At senior levels, identify the main features of senior roles and spans of responsibility.
Describe and compare across consortia
Relationship of consortia with local authorities including scrutiny
Are consortia commissioning actions independently or commissioned by others (e.g. WG or the LA) to act?
How is scrutiny by elected members organised?
Are scrutiny given sufficient information to hold schools and officers to account for performance and is this consistent between the different authorities in each consortium?
Strategic plans
What are the scope and characteristics of strategic plans and business plans?
Describe and compare consortia plans.
How do the plans reflect any differing priorities for the local authorities involved?
Performance management arrangements
Describe and compare arrangements for managing the performance of consortium staff/head teachers and senior school leaders (extent of use and support for the use of capability procedures)?
What use is made of school intervention powers across LAs/consortia and what use of powers under the SSO Act? Are senior officers/elected members in the local authority and senior officers in the consortium clear about their roles in implementing these powers?
Do challenge advisers and other officers independently evaluate the quality of leadership and management in schools to make sure that the LA/consortium has appropriate intelligence on which to act?
Is the quality of support from HR (whether LA or consortia based) good enough to help schools deal with underperforming staff? <i>Although we will ask the question we will not directly evaluate the quality of HR services</i>

Risk-assessment
At what levels are risks identified, managed and mitigated? What are the risks? How do they compare across consortia? Are consortia and local authorities risk-averse or are they innovating?
Use of data
Data analysis and communication/transparency
What PIs do RC use and do they reflect strategic plans?
Describe and compare what consortia do to analyse data on school performance and to build the capacity of school leaders to analyse their data themselves.
How are the consortia supporting the new mandatory data training for governors? Describe & compare what consortia do to ensure that governors receive the data and are trained to understand and use it and that parents receive comparable information.
School categorisation and criteria used
How is the national school categorisation model being applied in each region?
How effective are processes to quality-assure the work of challenge advisers and officers to make sure that the categorisation is applied with consistency and rigour? How closely matched have LA pre-inspection reports on schools been to Estyn inspection findings?
Do schools receive written feedback from officers' visits with clear follow-up actions and timescales so that schools understand well what needs to improve and the reasons for their current category?
Setting targets
Who sets and/or agrees targets for improvement for schools and sectors across the consortium?
How do they do this?
Pupil tracking systems
Do schools use common pupil tracking systems?
Are systems compatible across secondaries and their feeder primaries and across schools that together engage in cluster moderation of end-of-key stage TA assessments?
How does the consortia build on the good practice in a few LAs where effective pupil tracking systems were already being used to identify and address pupil underperformance. How does each consortium make sure that schools in these authorities are not disadvantaged by moving to the consortium?
Do data systems contain information on the progress made by all pupils including those with ALN and those involved in inclusion initiatives to enable LAs/consortia to evaluate their work thoroughly and know which initiatives and strategies are successful? Is there too much duplication between individual LAs and the consortium?
Delivery
Funding
How does the funding system work for the different consortia? What proportions of funding are used for the functions they deliver?
How well do consortia manage grant-streams especially hypothecated ones? How is use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant managed and monitored?

Is there funding going in to SIS functions in the LAs that is beyond the reach of the consortia?
Do the consortia control all relevant funding streams?
Is there duplication of funding?
Is funding properly targeted to meet need or is it shared out irrespective of need?
Are resources unwisely spent to deliver dry-run inspections for schools to get them Estyn-ready before a core inspection is due?
Staffing
How comparable are staffing levels?
How many staff, at what levels, are there in the different consortia?
How many challenge advisers are there? What is the balance between challenge advisers who are employed as such and those who work on a part-time or full-time secondment or self-employed consultant basis?
Are there comparable recruitment procedures, similar sets of duties and comparable arrangements for training for challenge advisers across consortia?
Is staffing appropriate to address the national priorities of literacy, numeracy and reducing the gap from poverty and to implement national initiatives?
Partnerships on the ground (links to initiatives and other agencies)
How well-co-ordinated are functions at consortium level with those at LA level notably ALN and social inclusion but also including children's services, finance and HR?
Is the consortia engaged in partnership work beyond the LAs? (e.g. single integrated plans, links with health or police services?)
Range of functions and their delivery in order to build school improvement capacity in the classroom and in leadership
Describe and compare (see Figure 6.2b in Robert Hill report)
What is their gate-keeping process to direct and match initiatives to schools?
Are schools clear about the levels of support they are entitled to (as opposed to those they can buy in to) and does this vary across consortia?
Is there an appropriate focus on underperforming schools or is too much time given to all schools which reduces the consortium's capacity to improve schools quickly enough?
Is there whole-school intervention?
How does the consortium broker school-to-school support?
Is there too much emphasis on support and insufficient on challenge to improve? (Or vice-versa)
Describe and compare support arrangements across consortia (challenge advisers etc)
Is the support offered for leaders comparable including for middle managers?
How do consortia influence the professional development of classroom practitioners ?
Is there support for LNF and tests and PISA?
Is there use of coaching for teachers?
Do they broker/commission external support?

Is there support for ICT for learning, NC subjects, 14-19, early years, SACRE, literacy and numeracy? What is the relationship between support provided or brokered by consortia and that provided by others (e.g. CFBT)
Is there support for governor training, monitoring NQTs and HR/back office support? Is governor training a general menu or is there bespoke support in schools causing concern?
Impact
Trends in data on performance (comparison at consortium and LA level of school outcomes data and inspection data)
Analyse and compare
For schools that have been inspected and required follow-up monitoring (LAM/EM/SI/SM), how well has the consortia, in partnership with the LA, held the school to account for progress in addressing the recommendations?
Evidence of impact of targeted interventions?
Monitoring and evaluation
How, and how regularly, are schools monitored?
How are schools supported in self-evaluation?
How well do consortia evaluate their own performance?
Is the monitoring and evaluation programme too dependent on Estyn's inspection cycle or is it informed by the consortia's own intelligence on it schools?

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