



Progress Report Against Wales Audit Office and Estyn Recommendations

February 2016

Wales Audit Office Recommendations

R3 :Develop improved arrangements for sharing practice between consortia and supporting efficiency

Progress to date

During the last year, the managing directors have agreed a joint plan to support collaboration that has been discussed with Estyn. The plan sets out a number of areas where joint working is desirable. These include:

- sharing practice concerning governance;
- sharing models of scrutiny and commissioning the WLGA to write a package of support for scrutiny members across the four regions.

Following a joint meeting in September the 2015 involving the managing directors and senior officers in the four consortia, the Central South Consortium's head of school-to-school support has met with her counterparts to share practice and strategies that support the growth of the self-improving system. The business manager has shared information with the business managers in the other regions. The head of school improvement has met with lead officers in the other three regions to start planning that will support sharing of effective practice concerning the challenge and support work of challenge advisers. A meeting involving senior challenge advisers and heads of service is planned for the 15th March which will address the following: arrangements to support the professional development of senior challenge advisers and their role in quality assurance; arrangements to support the development of challenge advisers.

The four regions have already worked well together to revise the national categorisation process. The Central South Consortium has also worked effectively with the EAS to: share capacity concerning implementation of the physical literacy programme; provide support for the implementation of the new Welsh Baccalaureate; support training to help prepare schools for the new GCSE specifications; develop strategy to reduce the impact of poverty on educational attainment. The adoption of the consortium's new information management system has also involved dialogue with both EAS and ERW who are using the same provider and has led to some efficiency savings in development costs. More recently a cross-consortium initiative involving Welsh-medium secondary schools in peer enquiry in triads has been developed.

What still needs to improve?

Satisfactory progress has been made to date in addressing this recommendation. However, there is still further work to do to take forward the planning of partnership working between the four regions to promote greater efficiency in the use of resources. This includes making sure that managing directors, the Welsh Government and ADEW use their time together to build effectively on collaborative planning.

Evidence:

Joint planning slides, agenda and notes from joint consortium meeting

R5: Improve the effectiveness of governance and management of regional consortia

Self-evaluation of performance and governance arrangements; the use of clear and measurable performance measures and the assessment of value for money; strategic risk management

Progress to date

The service has built on the steps taken in 2014-2015 to develop a self-evaluation report that has a wider evidence base and is more specific. The report provides a comprehensive and honest assessment of strengths and areas for improvement. The process and report are underpinned by effective use of relevant data, the outcomes of schools' and local authorities' inspections and challenge advisers work with schools.

As a result of the developments in the self-evaluation process referred to above the means to assess and identify key priorities for 2016-2017 and beyond is now stronger. The report provides a more effective basis on which to undertake forward planning. The business plan covering the period 2015-2016 responded appropriately to expectations from the Welsh Government including the requirement for headline business plans in key areas. However, although these plans went some way towards a clearer identification of measurable performance measures, work is being undertaken to sharpen identification of clear targets, success criteria and milestones in the draft planning process that is currently under way. There is now a much stronger link between the areas for improvement identified through self-evaluation and the key priorities identified in the service's draft business planning.

Self-evaluation has been strengthened further in a number of other ways. Officers responsible for key priority areas provided an evaluation for the period 2014-2015 of key actions taken, improvements and areas where further improvement is required which in turn informed the service's overall self-evaluation report. Meetings with the local authorities' directors and heads of service have also occurred on a termly basis to assess progress in working with the authorities' schools and in meeting the authority's particular needs. The self-evaluation report has also been informed by analysis of challenge advisers' national categorisation reports and the priorities in schools' improvement plans.

There is a more robust approach to evaluating the impact of collaborative work between schools through the Central South Wales Challenge involving the school improvement groups and pathfinder partnerships. Useful external evaluation of key aspects has been commissioned through respected research organisations focusing particularly on strategy to develop the self-improving school system, school-to-school support and the Outstanding/ Improving Teacher programmes.

As indicated in the service's self-evaluation report, the consortium's governance arrangements are soundly based and are now enshrined in a revised legal agreement. Following the thematic review in November 2014 the agreement makes clear that the arrangements represent jointly provided services with the local authorities. The governance arrangements fully comply with the Welsh Government's expectations in the National Model for regional working. Twice termly

meetings are well attended and are increasingly effective in their operation and in how members discuss, influence and probe decision making.

The business plan sets out a clear vision for the strategic direction of the service over a three-year period and details the characteristics of the school system by the end of that period. Over the last year the service has put in place arrangements for monitoring progress with the operational plans that underpin the business plan. The operations manager meets monthly with officers responsible for each plan and maintains and updates a database that records the progress being made and areas where progress is less evident.

The outcomes of the monthly monitoring meetings are shared with the senior leadership team in the team's regular meetings and officers are expected to take the action necessary when barriers to progress are identified. The senior leadership team has continued to use its performance dashboard to determine the extent to which procedures are complied with and to assess performance against a range of measures.

The approach taken to the identification and assessment of risk builds on that of the previous year and now is more systematic. The identification of risk is informed by the outcomes of the monthly monitoring referred to above and from other sources of evidence including those relating to external factors such as national policy. The risk register indicates the degree of risk in key areas and action taken to mitigate the potential impact of risk. The register is discussed at senior leadership team meetings, with the directors of education in the five authorities at their regular meetings and is a regular feature of the agenda of the Joint Committee. As a result, the service is now better placed to anticipate and respond to risk and this has allowed earlier action to be taken for example in areas such as preparation with schools to implement government policy concerning curricular change, measures to bolster capacity in the data team through the appointment of a senior statistician and forward planning to deal with changes to funding arrangements including grant.

The service is committed to demonstrating value for money in a climate where there are significant financial risks. Over the last year significant steps have been taken to assess value for money in a number of areas and to take difficult decisions in the interests of greater efficiency and effectiveness. This has involved in depth review of arrangements for providing support in key areas including the Foundation Phase, Welsh, the school improvement groups and pathfinder partnerships, the central support teams and more recently in relation to literacy and numeracy. As a result, changes have been made to the deployment of resources in partnership with schools that is in line with the commitment to the development of the self-improving system.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been made in some aspects concerning self-evaluation, business planning and risk management. However, there is still a need to:

- evaluate more keenly on an annual basis the effectiveness of the governance arrangements and to strengthen further the capacity of the joint committee to challenge aspects of performance;
- embed the arrangements for monitoring progress against targets and success criteria and risk in year in order to take follow up action more systematically;

- develop further the work to sharpen the identification of targets at the outset of improvement work to inform evaluation of impact

Evidence:

Self-evaluation report, business plan 2015-2016, headline business plans and work plans, evaluation of progress in 2014-2015 in key priority areas, service's dashboard, agenda and minutes of senior leadership team, directors, joint committee, legal agreement, NFER initial evaluation of self-improving system, IPSOSMORI report, ARAD research report into OTP/ ITP, value for money reports literacy and numeracy, Foundation Phase, Welsh, overall report for the service, central business and administrative teams, local authority progress reports.

Financial management arrangements

Progress to date

Further work has been done to build on the already sound arrangements for financial management.

There is a strong link made between the service's business plan and the drafting of the service's budget. As a result, the allocation of resources is linked closely to regional and national priorities and is agreed with all five local authorities' directors.

There is a strong commitment to delegating funding to schools and strong partnership arrangements with the local authorities to determine the allocation of revenue and the distribution of grant.

Arrangements to monitor and report expenditure against budget were assessed positively during the thematic review and auditing outcomes have continued to report no serious shortcomings. These arrangements have been further strengthened through monthly reporting to the senior leadership team via the performance dashboard and the information is also shared at directors' meetings. Fortnightly challenge meetings involving the managing director, business manager and senior accountant ensure that there is rigorous scrutiny of spending against budget. This is supplemented by monthly monitoring meetings between the business manager, senior accountant and individual budget holders. The Joint Committee exercises good overall responsibility for monitoring the consortium's financial position and for approving spending against priorities.

Since the review, steps have been taken to secure greater efficiency and to avoid duplication by working more collaboratively across local authorities in certain service areas. The service operates within a budget that is less than that indicated nationally. Initial analysis of outcomes suggests that the relationship between costs and performance compares favourably with that of the other three regions.

Over the last year the service has reviewed its provision more systematically to secure improvement and operate as efficiently as possible. A number of services have been restructured to realise efficiency savings, improve quality and release funds to schools in line with the commitment to a school-led system. The service has demonstrated the ability to take difficult decisions in the interests of greater effectiveness and efficiency in several areas.

The consortium deploys grant according to the needs of the region and in line with national terms and conditions. There is a strong commitment to delegating grant to support the capacity of schools to be self improving. The service has reduced radically the proportion of retained grant by the consortium and local authorities. Monitoring of the retained grant spend is generally effective.

There are suitable arrangements for informing schools of their grant allocations. Good work has been done in partnership with the authorities' finance teams to move all schools on to a common grant formula.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been made from a sound position in relation to this recommendation. There is still a need to strengthen further the arrangements for assessing the impact of spending on outcomes at various levels within the system and a need for greater rigour in working with schools to monitor the impact of grant on raising standards and improving quality.

Evidence:

Budget plan, annexes, monitoring reports, service level agreements, agendas/ minutes SLT, directors, finance officers, joint committee, audit of Financial Statements/ internal auditors' reports, statement of accounts, management dashboard, grant terms & conditions; schools' allocation letter, SLAs for delegated funding to local authorities.

Scrutiny arrangements

Progress to date

The local authorities' scrutiny arrangements that hold the consortium's officers and the lead cabinet member to account for performance alongside authorities' senior officers are now more consistent and regular across the region than previously.

Support to scrutiny committees has been improved over the last year. For example, the consortium has worked closely with each local authority to provide scrutiny committees with training and with data and related information that assist them in holding schools and officers to account for performance. The WLGA has also responded positively to the request to devise a programme of further training.

Annual reports on schools' performance for the scrutiny committee, with the consortium in attendance, are now a feature of the work of each authority. Over the last year the elected member who is the chair of the joint committee has been particularly active in meeting with scrutiny committee members in each of the local authorities alongside the managing director and senior challenge advisers. This has helped strengthen the lines of accountability, improve communication and promote better understanding of the consortium's work. In addition, each scrutiny committee has now agreed a common pattern of scrutiny meetings involving the consortium. Work is also planned to develop the presentation of data underpinning the provision of reports to scrutiny in a common and consistent format. Scrutiny committees have requested that work be done to inform parents about the work of the consortium. The necessary work has been completed in the form of an easy-to-understand parents' guide to the region.

In the thematic review reference was made to the need to provide more opportunity for scrutiny committees to share effective practice. The chairs of each of the five scrutiny committees in the region have now agreed a pattern of termly meetings which is due to be implemented during 2016-2017.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress is being made in response to this aspect of the recommendation. There is still some unevenness in scrutiny committees' knowledge and skills to enable them to probe strengths and weaknesses effectively. Consequently, there is still a need to do more work across the region to ensure better sharing of practice to promote greater consistency between scrutiny committees as planned.

Evidence:

Reports to scrutiny committees, agendas and minutes of scrutiny committee meetings.

Openness and transparency of decision making

Progress to date

The openness and transparency of decision making was evaluated positively during the thematic review in November 2014.

The consortium has maintained its already existing procedures which include the open publication of the agenda and minutes of the Joint Committee together with the papers discussed and the decisions made at meetings of the committee.

The working relationships between the consortium and the five local authorities are also a strong feature of practice. All matters relating to policy and procedure are discussed openly at meetings of the five directors which are always well attended. The meetings also provide for sharing practice in areas such as the use of statutory powers and have been effective in supporting greater consistency in this area in particular. Transparency is further enhanced by the presence of the Welsh Government's representative at these meetings. The agenda and minutes of the directors' meetings are available to all staff within the service.

The arrangements have been further strengthened during 2015-2016 through a number of further actions. There are now regular meetings between the business manager and financial services officers in each of the five local authorities. These have reinforced the sense of confidence and trust between officers in areas such as decisions concerning the deployment of grant. This has been particularly important in a climate where authorities are confronting severe financial constraints.

Collaboration with local authorities' officers in relation to governor support, HR services and inclusion services are also proving effective in promoting mutual understanding and openness between the consortium and local authorities between the authorities themselves.

What still needs to improve?

Very good progress has been made in relation to this aspect of the recommendation. The strong working relationships that have been established now need to be

maintained and developed further so that decisions about change in the interests of greater efficiency can be made with more impetus.

Evidence:

Agendas and minutes of joint committee, directors' meetings, meetings with financial services officers, governor steering group, notes and action plan HR services group

Addressing potential conflicts of interest

Progress to date

Over the last year the consortium has put in place a policy to guide the employment of consultants that includes guidelines concerning the arrangements for remunerating consultants employed on a temporary basis.

The consortium employs a number of challenge advisers, on a temporary or consultancy basis.

In most cases the work of consultants as a challenge adviser is their sole source of employment. In several instances the staff concerned are former or recently retired headteachers. In the very few instances where an employee may have another source of employment the policy requires the person to declare any potential conflict of interest and to follow the steps set out in the policy.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been made in clarifying the conditions concerning the employment of consultants. Given the context in which challenge advisers work it is likely that consultancy will remain a source of employment in the period ahead in order to maintain capacity at an appropriate level. As the self-improving system develops further there will be a need to keep the terms and conditions of challenge advisers in particular under review, as well as the rates of remuneration, to ensure that the service is able to continue to recruit individuals of high quality in the future.

Evidence:

Employment of consultants' policy, analysis of service costs and service structure.

Strategies for communication with key stakeholders

Progress to date

Communication with the service's principal stakeholders was evaluated positively during the thematic review. Since the review a number of actions have been taken to strengthen communication further.

The consortium has put in place a communications strategy for 2016-2017 which brings together the various elements that are key to the region's communication with stakeholders.

The consortium uses a wide range of communication channels that include: the consortium's internet website, social media, newspapers and news publications,

television and radio, face-to-face meetings, newsletters and correspondence, events and conferences, marketing campaigns.

The actions taken to date have, for example, given prominence to the commitment to a self-improving system and regular articles by headteachers, with the support of the region, have given a high profile to the development of school-to-school support.

Communication with schools has been developed further through a fortnightly e-bulletin that contains a wealth of relevant information. A consortium newsletter is produced each half-term and is distributed electronically to all key stakeholders including governors. The scope of this communication has been extended to include case studies of effective practice that are also available to schools via the consortium's website. The consortium is also active in supporting the communication needs of the school improvement hubs. This involves production and distribution of a termly hubs prospectus and the promotion of key events and programmes.

Internal communication has also been streamlined through the establishment of a staff intranet. This contains, for example, copies of a staff e-bulletin and is the location for gaining access to key documents such as those referred to during the service's development days.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been made in developing further the consortium's communication strategy. There is still a need to develop more in-depth communication with headteachers, and particularly governors, so that they are well placed to support the development of the self-improving system. There is also a need to strengthen the means to gain the views of children and young people, their parents and the wider community.

Evidence:

Communication strategy

Estyn Recommendations

R1 Improve performance management arrangements

Capturing, sharing and using data; monitoring the progress of pupils and schools regularly

Progress to date

The scope of the whole-school data packs has been broadened to include greater references to information about specific groups including eFSM pupils, pupils with SEN and EAL status. The pack now also contains national test data by eFSM eligibility.

The pupil level data packs, which are available to both schools and challenge advisers, provide summary information as well as information at individual pupil level about levels of progress within the national curriculum. The pupil level packs have been strengthened in 2015-2016 by including information about the characteristics of individual pupils alongside their outcomes. This information relates to the following: eFSM status; the nature of any special educational need; looked after children; English as an additional language; the Newbe status of pupils; individual attendance rates. A further pupil level data pack has been developed concerning the outcomes of the national reading and numeracy tests. This allows for a comparison between the test outcomes in years 2, 6 and 9 against teacher assessment outcomes.

Work is also nearing completion concerning the development of a vulnerable groups data pack which includes pupil numbers, attainment by pupil characteristics and progress by pupils' characteristics.

Work is also underway to implement a consistent approach to the provision of data that has been agreed with each local authority. This provides data in a consistent format and includes analysis by pupil characteristics at school level.

The target setting process has been strengthened by adding a requirement for schools to submit targets for both eFSM and nFSM pupils alongside those relating to boys, girls and all pupils.

The progress of pupils in Y11 is monitored through the collection of data against all of the key indicators at key stage 4 at four points during the academic year. This allows for productive dialogue between challenge advisers and schools about the progress of pupils and action the school is taking where progress is less than expected. There has been a stronger focus on the performance of vulnerable groups planned into development meetings.

In-year data about attendance is now collected more consistently across the five authorities. The data are received at least termly as a minimum but more frequently in the case of some authorities.

There is a systematic approach to monitoring the progress of schools requiring red and amber support. There is a strong focus on evidence of progress against the agreed priorities. This includes reference to the progress of pupils underpinning priorities related to improving standards. Challenge advisers' reports make appropriate references to pupils' progress and the standards they achieve.

What still needs to improve?

Satisfactory progress is being made relating to the use of data and to monitoring the progress of schools. However, there is a need to improve access to live data about the performance and progress of individual pupils through the implementation of a pupil level database as planned in order to:

- streamline the process for setting individual, cohort and whole-school targets;
- facilitate more readily analysis of the progress and performance of individuals and specific groups of pupils in year.

Evidence:

Whole-school data packs, pupil level data pack, vulnerable groups pack, local authority data pack, progress reports red and amber schools, data collection in Y11 and excel spreadsheet.

Individual performance management

Progress to date

The service's policy for performance management has been reviewed and rewritten. A process involving the establishment of corporate, performance and learning objectives has been implemented for all staff across the service using the RCT guidance as the framework for performance management. Within this framework it is expected that all staff will have a termly informal one-to-one meeting with their line manager and a termly review of progress against their objectives.

The corporate and performance objectives agreed are linked to the service's key priorities and there is flexibility to meet individual needs through a personal learning objective. Personal learning objectives make reference to the national standards for challenge advisers and are adapted for use with strategic advisers

The process involves an annual review which provides for judgements about performance using a four-point scale. Analysis of the outcomes of the annual review process in the autumn term indicate that the great majority of staff have met at least most aspects of their objectives. Incidences where performance fails to reach an acceptable standard are rare. There is close working with the RCT HR service to implement and manage the procedures for responding where there is underperformance.

There is now a stronger emphasis on meeting the professional development needs of staff as, for example, in provision made to develop coaching skills. The development programme for challenge advisers and strategic teams is more closely aligned to the service's needs and involves greater exposure to effective practice from schools.

There is an appropriate induction programme for newly appointed staff and newly appointed challenge advisers are also paired with an experienced challenge adviser who acts as a support and point of reference.

Arrangements to assure the quality and consistency of practice have been strengthened through greater scrutiny of written reports and action by line managers to accompany challenge advisers on their visits to schools.

What still needs to improve?

Satisfactory progress has been made in managing the performance of staff more tightly. The revised processes have strengthened accountability for performance across the service and are providing more evidence of the quality of the work of challenge advisers for example when working with schools. Nevertheless, there are still aspects that require improvement:

- More priority needs to be given to using the information arising from performance management to inform professional development activities collectively as a team and for individuals.
- More attention needs to be given to building the skills of challenge advisers and strategic teams not just to equipping staff to fulfil the main requirements of the role.
- More time needs to be devoted in development sessions to sharing views about the characteristics of excellent and good practice to promote greater consistency.

Evidence:

HR charter, template for review of performance against objectives, action plan template, objectives for senior challenge adviser, challenge advisers, strategic and business teams, evaluation of process and outcomes from the autumn term

R2 Secure greater consistency in the quality of challenge advisers' evaluations of schools, particularly in relation to teaching and leadership

Progress to date

Support to improve the quality of challenge advisers' evaluations has been provided in a number of ways. Time has been devoted in development days to discussing and sharing views on the characteristics of effective leadership as well as the features of effective provision in relation to teaching.

The criteria for assessing leadership, learning and teaching that underpin the judgments at step 2 of the national categorisation process have been reworked and are now more effective in how they support judgments in these areas.

The service has now established a writing protocol to guide the writing of reports together with a number of workshops in the autumn term to support the process further. The writing protocol has been backed up with examples of evaluative writing for the use of challenge advisers in the following areas: the writing of the national categorisation report; the writing of progress reports for red and amber support schools; the writing of notes of visit.

The service has continued to have an appropriate focus on learning and teaching and aspects of leadership through the work of challenge advisers with their schools. The challenge advisers' national categorisation reports now contain more robust and

extensive references to leadership, learning and teaching in line with the national requirements and identify suitable areas for improvement as part of the evaluation. The discussion underpinning the categorisation process has established a much more overt link between the evaluation of standards, leadership and teaching.

Challenge advisers working with red and amber support schools provide progress reports that record progress against the main priorities for improvement. These termly or half-termly reviews take appropriate account of a range of first-hand evidence from teaching and learning when judging progress against priorities. The stronger challenge and support is reflected in the fact that around two-thirds of red and amber schools in 2014-2015 made good progress such that their need for support has reduced in 2015-2016.

Challenge advisers have continued to work alongside senior leaders to support school self-evaluation and assessment of the quality of learning and teaching. This has involved challenge advisers in a variety of activities including joint lesson observation, learning walks, scrutiny of pupils' work and progress data and discussion about progress against the school's improvement priorities. In 2016 the focus of challenge advisers' activity is to provide an external perspective on the school's process for using first-hand evidence about the quality of learning and teaching and the nature and impact of work to raise standards for eFSM pupils.

Challenge advisers and senior challenge advisers also work closely with senior officers in the local authorities to support their use of statutory powers in circumstances where the concerns are such as to warrant this action. In most of these cases, this involves work with the authority to evaluate and secure improvement in the quality of leadership and teaching.

Arrangements for quality assuring the written evaluations of challenge advisers' reports have been strengthened. Senior challenge advisers and local authority senior officers scrutinise local authority briefings before inspections. Senior challenge advisers also scrutinise progress reports when a school is in inspection follow up. Quality assurance of challenge advisers' national categorisation reports is a significant element in the quality assurance process.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been made in addressing this area of work in most respects. However, there is still a need to achieve greater consistency in the quality of written evaluations overall, including those written by the strategic teams. There is also a need to extend further the quality assurance of progress reports and notes of visit.

Evidence:

Protocol for writing reports, national categorisation reports, quality assurance, examples of reports for green, yellow, amber, red support schools, progress reports for red and amber schools, exemplar progress reports and notes of visit, schedule of challenge adviser activity spring and summer terms 2016, Estyn Vale of Glamorgan and Merthyr monitoring reports.

R3 Improve the quality and range of support to schools

Progress to date

The consortium has continued to give a high priority to the development of collaboration between schools to support professional learning. The potential of school-to-school support to raise standards and build capacity in the system is a key element in the growth of a self-improving school system through the Central South Wales Challenge (CSWC).

Good work has been done over the past year to communicate and reinforce understanding of, and commitment to, collaborative working between schools and to share effective practice. This has involved two major regional conferences as well as discussion through meetings of the CSCW strategy group and meetings of convenors of the school improvement groups (SIGS). The CSWC is closely aligned to the National Model for regional working – that is, to develop a sustainable school-led system of improvement. It has involved the establishment of school improvement groups across the primary, secondary and special school sectors; more intensive pathfinder partnerships to support schools in difficulty; a headteachers' strategy group to inform the direction and coordination of policy.

From the initial rapid progress in establishing school improvement groups, the work with headteachers has succeeded in cementing collaboration between schools within a framework of activity that is now more planned and structured.

The collaborative activity has received strong support from schools' leaders. Close monitoring and a proactive approach have secured high levels of involvement by schools in SIG activity. There is active participation of most schools in the development of shared improvement plans in the school improvement groups.

There are now increased opportunities for schools' leaders to exercise system leadership through, for example, leading the school improvement hubs, the Foundation Phase Alliance, the regional CSWC strategy group. A majority of headteachers in the role of SIG convenor display system leadership that is increasingly effective. The development of the peer enquiry programme in phase 2 has also provided a significant minority of headteachers with the opportunity to fulfil a lead, host or support role.

There is willing participation in regional and national initiatives that involve the development of system leadership also. These include a large number of schools that have come forward to apply to be school improvement hubs and, more recently, to be selected as pioneer schools in response to the Welsh Government's application process.

There is now a clear role for schools' leaders across the region in influencing priorities as, for example, through the CSCW strategy group and the teaching and learning board.

Under the leadership of the head of school-to-school support good work is being done to strengthen accountability and the development of evidence of impact and professional learning. There is increasing evidence of the positive impact of collaborative work in a majority of the SIGs in agreed priority areas such as literacy

and numeracy and an appropriate focus on improving teaching practices and the related impact on outcomes.

There is also evidence of improvement in areas that have been priorities in schools involved in more intensive pathfinder partnerships and good work by challenge advisers in facilitating collaborative work and overseeing progress.

Support for schools has been further strengthened through the development of a database of case studies of effective practice accessed via the consortium's website. This database now contains 150 case studies covering a wide range of curricular and other aspects of a school's work. A more structured approach has been taken to the signposting of support through a professional learning offer and the publication of programmes of support from schools in the region, the central service and in partnership with higher education.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been made in addressing strategies to develop school-to-school support. There is a need now to continue to focus on the identification of intended improvements at the outset of collaborative activity to evaluate impact more robustly and to strengthen quality assurance of the sources of support.

Some work has been done to extend the range of support to include the non-core subjects, as for example through the identification of a lead practitioner school that has an outreach role in modern foreign languages. Six lead practitioners have also been appointed in the non-core subjects who will provide brokered support in response to practitioners' needs and the implementation of the new GCSE specifications, although this is only a recent development.

Evidence:

CSWC plan, CSC updates, overview of composition and work of SIGs, SIGs plans, agendas and notes of convenor meetings, SIG case studies and evaluations, Pathfinder evaluations, NFER initial evaluation, regional conference agendas and materials

R4 Develop clearer strategies to address the impact of deprivation upon education outcomes and ensure all actions are coherent in this purpose

Progress to date

Through the establishment of a regional strategy group, chaired by the Welsh Government's poverty champion, there is now a stronger emphasis on a strategic approach to the development of policy and procedure. The draft closing the gap strategy communicates clear messages about the need for ambition and high expectations and provides a more coherent framework for the development of policy and practice.

The capacity to improve provision and practice across schools is also being enhanced through:

- workshops and training events to support effective spending of the PDG;

- developmental work with a group of 12 lead schools to identify, evaluate and develop effective practice across the region with evaluation by research organisations (IPSOS MORI and University of South Wales);
- extensive work to help schools to combat material disadvantaged through guidance that draws on well-established research evidence about effective strategy provided by the Education Endowment Foundation toolkits and identification of effective practice by Estyn.
- identification of a bank of 12 case studies of effective practice available to all schools;
- regional conference provision to highlight the needs to raise standards and close the gap drawing on the work of successful practitioners)
- programme provision through the hubs and specialist centres.

In addition, the piloting of the Achievement for ALL programme in 10 schools is demonstrating initial evidence of impact on wellbeing and outcomes and the potential to inform practice more widely. Similarly, the Successful Lives pilot in six schools is proving evidence of early evidence of impact with regard to pupils' attendance, behaviour for learning and lower rates of exclusion.

The appointment of a Looked After Children regional lead represents a positive step forward in coordinating implementation of regional strategy in response to the Welsh Government's expectations. The coordinator has established good working relationships with the lead officers in each authority and is making good progress in developing a consistent approach to the deployment of the looked after element of the grant and to developing a much stronger focus on the impact on outcomes. The approach has also strengthened the capacity to develop and share effective provision and practice across the five authorities.

The service is giving a high profile to reducing the impact of poverty and a high priority to this area of its work in a number of ways:

- The school improvement groups (SIGs) are encouraged to consider strategies to raise standards and close the gap through their collaborative work and about a quarter of SIGs have focused on aspect that relate to this area of work to date.
- All challenge advisers, strategic advisers and their teams and the service's business and administrative staff have a corporate objective that relates to eFSM outcomes as part of their performance management objectives. Progress against these objectives is assessed as part of the termly arrangements for reviewing progress.
- Collaboration with challenge advisers in EAS during 2015-2016 is establishing a common understanding of effective provision and practice and the intention to develop together a toolkit to inform challenge and support.
- Challenge advisers discuss with schools' leaders and governors the performance of eFSM pupils as part of the national categorisation process. Comment about the performance of these pupils is a frequent feature of the reports and is identified as an area for improvement more consistently than previously.

- The programme of training and briefing for governors from the spring term 2016 is focusing on the need to have high expectations for eFSM pupils and to ensure that provision has a positive impact. Feedback from the sessions indicate they are being evaluated positively.

Schools are briefed in meetings about the expectations concerning the spending of the pupil deprivation grant at the start of the academic year and the grant conditions are set out in writing. Monitoring of grant compliance is an increasing element of the service's work. The effectiveness of schools' approaches to the deployment of the grant and its impact is a feature of the 2016 spring and summer term challenge adviser schedule of visits to schools.

What still needs to improve?

Satisfactory progress is being made in respect of this recommendation. Although appropriate action is being taken to effect change much of the work is at an early stage of development. There is a need for more robustness in identifying the intended impact of the various strands of the strategy to support evaluation. There is also a need to work with schools to achieve greater rigour in how the grant is deployed and the impact of spending monitored. There are still variations in the quality of school improvement plans and a need to improve the effectiveness with which they set out the detail of their strategy for reducing the impact of poverty on outcomes.

Evidence:

PDG guidance document, Closing the Gap draft Strategy, agendas and minutes of Valleys Project, IPSOS MORI report, case studies, knowledge database 12 best practice case studies, regional and LA LAC strategy and action plans

R5 Involve diocesan authorities effectively in the strategic planning and evaluation of regional services

Since the thematic review a pattern of regular meetings involving the representatives of the Church-In-Wales and Roman Catholic Dioceses has been established. There are now termly meetings between the managing director, the head of school improvement and the respective diocesan education directors.

The meetings provide an important opportunity to discuss a range of matters of immediate concern. The meetings also involve discussion about the performance of schools, the outcomes of categorisation, work with schools causing concern and the consortium's business plan.

The two diocesan education directors are now full members of the consortium's advisory board and have attended the meetings arranged over the last year. In this context, they have suitable opportunities to discuss and influence the consortium's evaluation and business planning.

What still needs to improve?

Strong progress has been achieved in involving the diocesan authorities more systematically in the consortium's meeting arrangements. As a result, there is now a better understanding of respective priorities and areas for improvement. There is still work to do to clarify the role of the diocesan authorities in strategic planning and evaluation and how this sits alongside their roles in respect of the five local authorities.

Evidence:

Agendas and minutes of meetings with diocesan directors.