

Report on the Central South Consortium Response to the Welsh Audit Office / Estyn Remit Review of Consortia, published in June 2015.

Background

Estyn and the Welsh Audit Office undertook fieldwork together in October 14 to January 15 to review the progress of the implementation of regional consortia working since 2012.

The WAO were looking particularly at the effectiveness of governance arrangements. Estyn were reporting on the progress being made by consortia to provide school improvement services. Estyn were also keen to use the process to develop a framework through which consortia could be inspected. The framework is due in September 2015 and inspections of all four regional consortia will follow in the Spring/Summer of 2016.

Central South Consortium's response to the findings

The five authorities and Consortium in Central South Wales welcome the findings of both reports and the contribution that Estyn and the Welsh Audit Office are making to supporting improvement in the region.

History of the Consortium

The Central South region is the most populous region of Wales with a third of the children in Wales served by 406 schools across the five authorities of Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan. The region also represents a third of the most deprived communities in Wales and increasing diversity with more communities without English or Welsh as a first language.

The Central South Consortium was established at pace by the five local authorities in the region in September 2012. It was established very quickly and struggled to gain the confidence of schools and authorities in the early days.

In 2013 the five authorities commissioned a review of the consortium's effectiveness which resulted in some significant restructuring, a review of governance, the appointment of a permanent leadership team and the launch of a new strategic direction for the region: 'The Central South Wales Challenge': leading a self improving school system led by Professor. Mel Ainscow.

The Consortium receives £4.4m annual revenue funding from the five authorities which is (according to the WAO) approximately 1% of education spending in the region. This has remained the same since 2012 and is below the recommended level of funding which the Consortium should receive as proposed by the Welsh Government. A key focus of our work is delivering value for money and increased efficiency in our work in the region.

Central South Wales Challenge

In January 2014 the Central South Wales Challenge strategy group launched the 'Challenge' to all heads in the region. The approach is based on the evidence of what works in high performing school systems. This means our aims are that:

- schools are communities where teachers work together to improve teaching practice;
- groups of schools engage in joint practice development;
- more intensive partnerships provide support for schools facing difficulties;
- families and community organisations support the work of schools;
- coordination of the system is provided by school leaders; and

- local authorities work together to act as the conscience of the system.

The strategy is coordinated by a strategy group made up of headteachers from the region. The work includes a number of strands of work which include putting all schools in the region into groups (School Improvement groups or SIGs) to learn from each other. The approach also involves brokering 'pathfinder' partnerships between schools which can learn from each other, investing in 'hub' schools which are schools with strong teaching and learning systems as a resource for all schools across the region and brokering 'peer reviews' of schools by schools to build effective self-evaluation leading to improvement.

Working together with evidence based intervention

An area of focus in Central South has been a consistent, evidence-based approach to the way that we challenge and support schools. Consortia are able to both recruit and develop a stronger workforce than individual local authorities, work together to harness the best practice in the region for the whole region and evaluate effective interventions together. The partnership of five authorities and consortia in Central South has been working hard to learn from what has worked in a number of areas, including in attendance strategies, governor services and in consistent high quality intervention processes where progress in schools has been unsatisfactory.

We have also reviewed the role and appointments of challenge advisers. The challenge adviser role is about working with governors and schools' leaders to challenge and support their capacity to be self-improving. The approach is much more about working in partnership with schools rather than "doing to" schools. We have reviewed our challenge adviser team to ensure that we have very experienced staff working with schools, the majority of whom are or have been recently, successful senior leaders in schools. We will continue to intervene rigorously and robustly in schools where improvement has been insufficient. Whilst we are growing a school led system we do also provide direct support to vulnerable schools in core subjects and we are working more closely to support effective governance and Human Resources services to schools seeking to delegate as much resource to schools as possible so that it can be put to effective use.

Results in the region

The Wales Audit Office (WAO) and Estyn reports published in June questioned the impact of the Consortia partnerships. The results in 2015 in the Central South Consortium demonstrate that by working together schools, authorities and consortia, schools across the Central South region are now showing real and sustained progress since 2012.

In particular:

- In 2011 the region was one of the worst performing regions in Wales but now sits above the national average at foundation phase, key stage 2 and 4 in many indicators.
- At key stage 2, the number of pupils aged between 7 and 11 years old, achieving their expected target has increased by 2 percentage points from 85.8% to 87.8% in 2015, up from 80.9 in 2012. This compares to a national increase of 1.6 percentage points and a national average of 87.7%.
- At key stage 3 pupils aged between 11 and 14 years olds have seen a significant rise of 3.3 percentage points in 2015 from 80.3% in 2014 to 83.6%, up from 70.2% in

2012. This is against a national average of 2.9 percentage points improvement taking the national figure to 83.9%.

- Key stage four results in the region in 2014 at the Level 2+ measure (5 GCSE passes at grades A* - C including English/Welsh and mathematics) saw the fastest improvement nationally rising by just under 5 percentage points. Provisional results in the region in 2015 are once again very promising – data to be published in the autumn;
- The gap between the achievement of children claiming free school meals and their peers has narrowed again at every key stage.

In inspection too, the region is showing improvement with more schools demonstrating good or better performance and receiving a good or excellent judgement on standards compared to 2011/12. Inspection of local authorities, in particular in RCT and Bridgend, have demonstrated the added value consortia working has brought where both authorities were removed from Estyn monitoring in the last year.

Areas for improvement

Following the fieldwork by Estyn and WAO in the Central South region in November 14, a number of recommendations were made. These recognised positive progress in CSC in establishing strategy and vision, engagement and relationships, self evaluation, governance and financial management and improving challenge adviser credibility.

However, there were a number of areas where improvement is needed both in CSC and nationally which are reflected in the recommendations of the Estyn and WAO report. We have summarised these below:

1. **Governance and scrutiny.** The Central South Consortium operate as a partnership of the five authorities working together to generate improvement and efficiencies across the region. This can be demonstrated by the appointment of joint roles working across the authorities and consortium. We have revisited the job descriptions of these roles to make sure accountability is tight. We have also included the Diocese in our governance model. The consortium will report to every one of the local authorities' scrutiny committees in January each year. We will hold our Joint Committees in each authority and invite the Scrutiny committee to observe. We are bringing the Chairs of Scrutiny together to discuss progress and areas for improvement with the leadership team of the Consortium.
2. **Business planning, smarter operational planning and collaboration with other consortia.** We have a business plan with a three-year vision and will be modeling the next three years with indicative budgets. We have reviewed our operational planning making the review of progress and evaluation of impact smarter. We were noted for our honest self- evaluation, decision making, transparency and risk management but will improve links further between self-evaluation and business planning this year and continue to review risks regularly. We have led a conference in September of the four consortia to share practice and have a number of areas of joint work not least Challenge Adviser training delivered in partnership with EAS.
3. **Quality assurance and performance management.** This is always a priority. We have reviewed our framework for challenge advisers and will be providing additional training to tighten assessment of teaching and leadership and to strengthen evaluative writing to provide evidence about the impact of intervention when required.

We have also reviewed our quality assurance approach across all of our work and strengthen our performance management system.

4. **Focus on reducing the gap and use of data.** Our new strategic lead for this area has developed our Closing the Gap strategy and guidance for schools. We will strengthen the use of data, including target setting by challenge advisers to highlight the progress of vulnerable groups. We have strengthened the accountability for improvement of these groups across schools particularly at risk of underperformance. We already use pupil level data in our work, and we will be developing a common pupil level database that will link schools' and pupils' performance data held in the region with the wider data in each local authority.
5. **Financial management.** Again Estyn and the WAO commented in feedback on good financial management in place in CSC. We will continue with a particular focus on demonstrating value for money across the region and in each authority.

Areas for further work by Welsh Government

We would highlight a number of specific areas.

- **School funding.** The Welsh Government Department for Education needs to review how grant and revenue budgets are set, allocated and reviewed to ensure as much efficiency in the system as possible. The Minimum Funding Guarantee is welcome and needs to continue and be monitored across the country. In particular, a number of flexibilities in relation to the Education Improvement Grant (EIG) were announced last year which have yet to be realised in practice because of retained terms and conditions around predecessor grants. The Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) and Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC) grant are both very significant levers focused at the most vulnerable whilst building sustainable capacity in the school system. They are crucial to ongoing levels of improvement, whilst continuing to focus on efficiency and value for money. Most immediately it would be helpful if work were done as early as possible this autumn to set grant budgets so that we can indicate funding levels to schools to plan for improvement work.
- **Strategic medium term planning.** We support the need for a consortia business planning model, ideally with a three-year timescale but are realistic about the uncertainties of the election and local government re-organisation. It would be helpful if some thought were given to the long term future of Consortia within this. The national accountability model can be made more efficient to enable regions to be more impactful.
- **Risk of distraction by new policies poorly implemented.** Consideration should be given to managing new national initiatives very carefully including that of the new qualification and curriculum changes in a way that least disrupts and builds on the progress nationally.
- **More freedoms and flexibilities for good schools.** In a tighter financial climate we need to enable our best schools to lead the way towards better models of school improvement. This means increased flexibilities to work together in challenging ways with other schools and fewer burdens. It would be helpful if there could be some strategic thinking about ways that increased freedoms could be earned by schools with strong leadership, a clear capacity to improve and a willingness to be suitably self reflective, so that resources are used in the most effective way across all regions.