



**Evidence for  
Excellence in  
Education**

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## **Final Report**

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# **Central South Wales Challenge: What does a self-improving school system look like?**

**National Foundation for Educational  
Research (NFER)**



# Central South Wales Challenge: What does a self-improving school system look like?

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# 1. Background, aims and methodology

## 1.1 Background

Improving education is a key feature of the policy agenda in Wales. This includes both raising attainment overall and ensuring that the system enables all learners to fulfil their potential, irrespective of their background or circumstances. In order to achieve this, the Welsh Government and the four regional consortia have embarked on a series of measures to reform the way the education system operates. This includes a reappraisal of the way schools are supported.

Since January 2014 the Central South Consortium (CSC) has overseen the Central South Wales Challenge, an initiative to raise standards across all schools in the region. Specifically, the Challenge was designed to stimulate the sharing of expertise amongst schools.

In October 2014 the Welsh Government set out in *Qualified for Life* (Welsh Government, 2014)<sup>1</sup> its education improvement plan. It stated its vision as: 'that learners in Wales will enjoy teaching and learning that inspires them to succeed, in an education community that works cooperatively and aspires to be great, where the potential of every child and young person is actively developed' (p.4). In order to achieve this vision it set out its four strategic objectives, including 'Leaders of education at every level working together in a self-improving system, providing mutual support and challenge to raise standards in all schools' (p.5).

In February 2015 Professor Graham Donaldson's report *Successful Futures: an independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2015) recommended the development of a new approach to curriculum and assessment arrangements that were designed to enable children and young people in Wales to become:

- ambitious, capable learners ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors ready to play a full part in life and work
- healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society and
- ethical, informed citizens ready to be citizens of Wales and the world.

The recommendations contained in *Successful Futures* were accepted by the Welsh Government alongside a commitment to allow schools to lead the process of developing the new curriculum and assessment arrangements.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/141001-qualified-for-life-en.pdf>

Consequently, networks of around 200 Pioneer Schools have been established, including 48 in CSC and given responsibility for curriculum design and development, professional learning and the development of Digital Competence.

It is important to note that this work is not confined to Pioneer Schools and that they have engaged with others across the region where this was appropriate (a model of working which has been promoted by the Welsh Government across the four regions). Although this was a priority set externally for schools (i.e. the government's decision to develop a new curriculum for Wales), it is being implemented in a way which allows schools to take the lead.

This approach signaled a clear intent by the Welsh Government to harness schools' expertise as it shaped Wales' educational future. However, while the Pioneer School networks are an important aspect of the way schools are working together, they were not a focus of the work undertaken for this project.

## 1.2 Aims and methodology

In January 2015 CSC commissioned NFER to help to develop practice with schools and to share learning across the system. This was to be undertaken by addressing the key questions outlined below:

- What progress has been made in the development of a self-improving school system, at a system level, in terms of what has been done so far, and how it has been done?
- To what extent are stakeholders engaged with the changes?
- To what extent have the necessary structures and processes been established e.g. opportunities for Peer Enquiry, Hubs and partnership working?
- What is working well and what needs to be developed further?
- What is the impact on teaching and learning so far as a result of school-to-school work and what is the evidence?
- What are the outcomes of the changes, especially on those of children receiving free school meals?
- What are the barriers, and opportunities to progression?

In order to address these aims, NFER researchers conducted in-depth discussions with staff across the CSC and its constituent local authorities in two waves:

- The first wave formed part of a baseline review (spring 2015) leading to an [interim report](#) produced in September 2015.



- The second wave of research took part during the second half of 2016 and first quarter of 2017 and the results are presented in this report.

During the second wave of the research, focus group and individual face-to-face discussions were held with:

- **Staff with strategic perspectives:** senior staff in the Central South Consortium and in its constituent local authorities
- **Challenge advisors:** a group of challenge advisors working in the Central South Wales region
- **School leaders:** approximately 30 school leaders, mainly headteachers but also including deputy and assistant headteachers, working in schools in the Central South region.

These discussions examined to what extent the Central South region had made progress towards a school-led system of school improvement since the first wave of interviews in 2015.

As noted above, these discussions were held in the context that since the first wave of interviews the Welsh Government has established networks of Pioneer Schools to drive the implementation of the reforms required by *Curriculum for Wales – Curriculum for Life* (Welsh Government, 2015).

As was noted in the [interim report](#) (NFER, 2015), estimating the level of engagement in the practice of the various models of school-to-school working was not easy given that the evidence is wholly qualitative and in some cases tentative. At the same time, while this project has gathered the views of staff with strategic perspectives in the Consortium and its constituent local authorities, challenge advisors and school leaders, it has not been able to capture the perspective of other practitioners, in particular classroom teachers. An on-line survey beginning in the summer of 2017 will provide on-going data about practitioners' attitudes towards a school-led model of improvement and the factors which need to be refined to make it operate to maximum effect (Hadfield and Barnes, 2017).

## 2. Research findings

This chapter presents the evidence collected from discussions with interviewees across Central South Wales about the development of a school-led system of improvement, stakeholders' engagement, the extent to which the necessary structures are in place, and the strengths and weaknesses of the various forms of collaboration. It then considers the evidence of impact. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the key issues identified and areas for future development.

### 2.1 What progress has been made in the development of a self-improving school system?

Participating headteachers felt that schools were developing the mind-set and behaviours that were required in a school-led model of improvement. They felt that the notion of schools driving their own improvement in conjunction with their peers was much more embedded in stakeholders' minds than was the case during the first wave of interviews. They referred in particular to the emphasis which had been placed on building capacity at different levels across the system.

They pointed out that the work had helped to develop headteachers' skills in two specific ways. First, the way they work with other schools and second, how to increase capacity for practitioner-led professional development within their own schools. They referred to two distinct outcomes that had developed in light of this work with headteachers which were evident within schools and between schools:

- **within schools:** practitioners were more inclined to look outside their own classrooms, to take responsibility for all learners in their school
- **between schools:** school leaders and some classroom teachers were increasingly involved in work to support professional learning across the region and were conceiving their role in terms of the success of the system as a whole rather than being solely concerned with their own school.

The development of these approaches has been based on the links that have been developed between schools in different parts of the region evidenced by:

- schools working across different local authorities
- cross-phase working
- examples where practitioners from mainstream schools have worked with colleagues in special schools
- examples where Welsh-medium schools have worked with colleagues in the English-medium sector.

This was achieved through four models of collaboration –SIGs, Hub schools, Peer Enquiry, and Pathfinders, which are examined individually in Section 2.4 (below).

The focus group discussions indicated that the majority of the headteachers and other senior leaders who took part in the discussions were comfortable with the notion of school leaders as system leaders and they themselves were keen to fulfil those roles. However, they maintained that more work was required to build capacity within the system if Central South was to move completely towards a school-led model of improvement. In particular, they believed there was a need to increase the critical mass of school leaders who were willing and able to take responsibility as system leaders. This applied both to the role of leading professional learning within schools and across schools.

Interviewees with strategic perspectives both in the Consortium and in local authorities believed that schools still needed to travel further along the journey towards a school-led notion of improvement, although they believed they were reaching a ‘tipping point’ in the process. Specifically, they felt that the majority of headteachers were emerging as system leaders and that this was a key ingredient in the process of developing new approaches to school improvement. They perceived a growing recognition that stakeholders across the Central South region acknowledged that expertise rested primarily in schools rather than elsewhere in the education system. This was leading to a culture in which it was more commonplace for schools to work together and interact. These perceptions are echoed in the Consortium’s self-evaluation which suggests that the system is improving overall but that further progress is required, particularly in secondary schools.

## 2.2 To what extent are stakeholders engaged with the changes?

Interviewees working in schools, the Consortium, and local authorities believed that the method of schools working with other schools to support school improvement was becoming embedded as a way of working. It was noted by some that schools had realised that school collaboration was not a temporary or one-off programme but a way of providing on-going mutual support. Compared with the first wave of interviews, there was a stronger perception among school representatives that the notion of a school-led model of improvement was the right direction of travel for schools in the Central South Consortium area. This was primarily because of the opportunity it presented for practitioners with current, relevant experience to work with their peers to develop ways of responding to their needs and challenges.

On the whole, interviewees felt that schools engaged well with each facet of the South Central Challenge but that much depended on the specific focus that was chosen for each activity. They emphasised that it was important that

the relevant people engaged with this work and that there was little to be gained when a school made a token effort to attend an activity. One important development was that deputy or assistant headteachers and, increasingly, middle leaders and other classroom teachers, engaged with this work, depending on the theme and focus (see Section 2.4).

The discussions in the first wave of fieldwork indicated there was a widespread feeling among headteachers that some schools were more convinced than others by the notion of a school-led model. Some participants recognised that the immediate priorities of a practitioner's own school would inevitably be prioritised over supporting someone else. Such views were less evident during the second wave of fieldwork (even though the school leaders who took part could not say that all schools were fully engaged in the work or convinced by the model).

Consortium senior managers and challenge advisors, believed that there was clear evidence that the region was moving towards a school-led system. They felt that schools were engaging in the work and were more confident that a larger number of schools were genuinely engaging. This was especially true of the Welsh-medium sector. They attributed this to a growing recognition across all schools of the potential of a school-led model and the fact that it offered a new way of working rather than a temporary set of activities with which they would be expected to engage. In order to enable this to happen, challenge advisors and other Consortium personnel had continued to emphasise the need for school improvement to be led by schools rather than external stakeholders, reinforcing the decision to 'let go' and allow schools to develop their own solutions to the challenges confronting them. They perceived that schools were taking ownership of the improvement agenda and were realising the opportunities and challenges associated with doing so. For example, they described how schools were identifying which SIGs they wanted to join which suggested that they were identifying their own needs and understood how to address them. They gave concrete examples of how schools were beginning to turn towards each other for support and their comments suggested that they saw this as the way forward in terms of future support structures.

However, interviewees across the system (including chief officers, challenge advisors and school leaders) still recognised that schools differed in the granularity to which they engaged with the improvement agenda: some continued to talk in very broad terms about 'school improvement' while others had identified very detailed issues that needed addressing. Likewise, some groups of schools were more inclined than others to trial different approaches and to experiment with new techniques after they had been modelled or discussed in meetings with other schools.

At the same time, not all school leaders were convinced by the notion of school collaboration. A few felt that working with other schools was a distraction and that the best way of improving their school was to 'look

inwards' and harness the expertise which rested within it. Others insisted that the system was fragile and that schools were mindful of the time they spent outside their school and noted that 'you want your best teachers in your own school'. They were not convinced of the benefits of collaboration and nor did they always feel that the staff with whom they worked in other schools were at the cutting edge of practice.

At the same time, school leaders were not convinced by some of the specific approaches that had been modelled by other schools. For example, fine grade making and the PiXL training were considered by some interviewees to be too generic and not tailored to the contexts of the participating schools.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a few interviewees suggested that the people coming into their schools had not engaged sufficiently with their school's needs.

## 2.3 To what extent have the necessary structures and processes been established?

### **Structures for collaboration**

The discussions indicated that the structures which were established by the time of the first wave of the research (SIGs, Hub schools, the Pathfinders, and Peer Enquiry) had consolidated and become more embedded during the intervening period.

School leaders described how the SIG groups have developed their own momentum and are now led by the participating practitioners. The SIGs had evolved from the position where schools had been allocated randomly to a situation where they had developed links based on their identification of their needs.

Interviewees in the Consortium and local authorities, and school leaders suggested that schools were much more willing to work across local authority boundaries and that this was evidence of a broader 'step change' in the way schools in the Consortium's area understood what they needed to do in order to improve. The fact that schools were choosing to work across local authority boundaries also provided useful exposure to different ways of working.

The evidence that schools were setting the agenda for the SIG work was seen as a reflection of the way that their confidence to identify their own needs had developed. Although interviewees with strategic perspectives believed that further work was necessary to consolidate schools' capacity to identify their own needs, they recognised that schools had made noticeable progress since the first wave of interviews

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<sup>2</sup> A network of 1,500 schools collaborating on school improvement, not a specific focus of the CSC's work.

At the same time, since the first wave of interviews the number of Hub schools in the Central South region had increased and they have changed the way they work (see Section 2.4). In particular, the Consortium has taken steps to improve the quality of their provision and to ensure that the model responds more effectively to schools' needs. This was done so that the Hubs would be able to harness the strengths and expertise which exist in the region's schools. However, while recognising the progress that had been made, some interviewees believed that there was a need to strengthen quality-assurance processes to ensure that the Hubs continued to provide high-quality input.

Interviewees in the Consortium and local authorities, and school leaders noted that, with very few exceptions, schools which had worked together to conduct Peer Enquiry had worked well together. This aspect of the collaboration had been well-supported and had secured the right balance between monitoring, support and giving schools the freedom to drive the work themselves.

### **Building capacity to engage**

Staff with strategic roles noted that schools were seconding deputy headteachers and other senior staff to work with other schools which meant that the work was no longer confined to headteachers. However, capacity to engage in school-led improvement work remains variable. School leaders believed there was much to be done to address the issue of 'back staffing' and its implications for the way schools would work and issues of quality and standards in schools providing support. School leaders and challenge advisors specifically recognised the issues around the time that schools had to devote to supporting each other, the challenge of convincing governors that this represented the right way forward, and the danger of continually using the same schools.

### **Refining support systems**

School leaders described the impact which the move towards a school-led system was having on the role of challenge advisors (and others working for the Consortium) who were now focusing much more on coordination and brokerage (in particular the work of mapping where expertise lay, signposting schools to where the expertise lay, and helping schools to make initial contact and to keep the work flowing). This meant they were able to use their knowledge of the school system as a whole in order to support schools to establish mutually-beneficial partnerships. Schools' responses suggested that this aspect of the Consortium's support role had evolved since the first wave of interviews. They noted that schools rated green by the [National Categorisation System](#) were offering support to those categorised as red/amber (as they were required to do), and that this was being coordinated by the Consortium staff. This was something which they believed could be developed further, provided that schools had the capacity to do so. Speaking more broadly, some school leaders suggested that the Consortium's

coordination and brokerage role in general needed to evolve further as part of a step change to a school-led system of improvement.

## 2.4 What is working well and what needs to be developed further?

Schools' representatives indicated that they were beginning to set the agenda in terms of the focus of the work being undertaken. This was as a result of their experience of engaging with a range of school-to-school activities, especially joint-practice development, which included:

- conducting lesson observations and reflecting on the methods and outcomes achieved, including the use of 'triads' involving focused discussions between 3-4 practitioners
- undertaking collaborative lesson planning
- discussing specific programmes and approaches to teaching and learning
- developing classroom materials
- evaluating assessment methods, including the way practitioners used IT applications to support their work
- discussing issues relating to specific groups of learners, such as those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), the More Able and Talented (MAT), and those eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM).

In addition, a small amount of work had focused on gathering and analysing research evidence.

This work had taken place across the different forms by which schools have engaged with the South Central Challenge: the Peer Enquiry process, the Hub schools, SIG groups, and the Pathfinders. Due to the specific experiences of these three models they have been considered individually. The overarching key messages from all experiences are then examined.

### 2.4.1 Harnessing school expertise: peer enquiry

School leaders, challenge advisors, and staff with strategic perspectives in both the Consortium and the local authorities believed that Peer Enquiry, where practitioners conducted focused evaluations of work in other schools, was emerging as an effective aspect of the work in the region. They felt that Peer Enquiries were valued as a way of making judgments and identifying areas for development that enjoyed the credibility of being made by those with current practical experience in school. Although schools found it very challenging, it could be very beneficial. As one school leader noted 'you have people coming in and looking at the detail of what you're doing'. The nature of the work also meant that they gained a 'warts and all' picture of a school's progress. Another school leader cited the findings of external evaluation

(Matthews, 2016) which commended important aspects of the way the system was operating.

Some interviewees felt they needed to go further to ensure that the outcomes of a Peer Enquiry were used on an on-going basis, 'a living process' was one phrase used. They also believed that there was a need for some of the enquiries to be more focused and for there to be greater consistency in the way the work is done. This reflected two broad concerns. First, that there was a need to clarify the relationship between the work carried out through Peer Enquiry and that undertaken by challenge advisors in order to ensure that the distinctions were understood clearly. Second, that there was a need for the Consortium to establish agreed parameters for each enquiry in order to ensure that they did not concentrate solely on a narrow range of issues.

Some school leaders also noted that external pressures (such as staff capacity problems and Estyn inspections) occasionally influenced schools' ability to engage with these enquiries. This was linked to a separate issue raised about the problems which could be caused if too many of a school's staff were needed to take part in such work given the implications this had for schools' ability to function from day to day.

#### 2.4.2 Harnessing school expertise: the Hub model

School leaders and challenge advisors described the changes that have been made to the way the Hubs work since the first waves of interviews. The original function, which was closer to the traditional model of training courses, has been replaced with a stronger focus on leading work in partnership with participants.

School representatives echoed the findings of the first wave of interviews that the Hub school model provided an effective means of modelling practice that was led by practitioners with recent, relevant experience in school. Four themes emerged in the discussions with interviewees about ways in which the Hub model could be strengthened. These relate to quality assurance, brokerage, contextualising the content, and ensuring some form of follow-up, as outlined below:

**Quality assurance:** school leaders believed there was a need for more transparent quality assurance to ensure that all stakeholders had confidence in the work being led by the Hub schools. This was an issue which was raised during the first wave of interviews and some believed that there was still some room to strengthen arrangements for identifying and exchanging effective practice. In particular there was a need to ensure that Hub schools kept abreast of developments and that a stronger emphasis to be placed on harnessing research evidence.

**Brokerage:** challenge advisors and some school leaders were concerned that schools could gravitate naturally to specific Hub schools based on existing



relationships or a history of working with them. This reinforces the need for effective brokerage in order to ensure that provision genuinely matches need.

**Contextualising the content:** school leaders described how Hubs had supported them to develop practice in light of their own school's contexts. This was an aspect of the work which had evolved since the first wave of interviews and was gaining momentum.

**Follow-up arrangements:** associated with the need to contextualise the training, some school leaders suggested that the work of the Hubs would be more effective if there was more follow-up. For example, they suggested that those participating in the work should be encouraged to develop their own action plans in response to what they had seen which could then be monitored and discussed to evaluate how their practice had been influenced by what they had seen.

### 2.4.3 Working in groups of schools

SIGs have continued to evolve as a means of enabling groups of schools to develop work in an area of interest to them. As noted above, some SIGs were beginning to set their own agenda as part of the development of a school-led system of improvement. However, local authority staff with strategic perspectives, challenge advisors, and school leaders acknowledged that this was far from being consistent across the Consortium.

Those school leaders who were interviewed had participated in SIGs which had focused on issues like:

- reflecting on teaching and learning
- conducting learning walks
- refining how schools worked with different age groups, or specific groups of learners such as MAT and learners with ALN
- reflecting on how well the LNF and the Digital Literacy Framework are embedded in their curriculum
- revising specific schemes of work
- strengthening specific curriculum areas which schools had identified as weaker aspects in their self-evaluations
- developing pedagogy
- discussing issues around differentiation.

A major focus had been placed on developing work to strengthen school leadership which had involved a broader spectrum of school senior leaders (not only headteachers). The work had included:

- discussing and modelling effective leadership practice
- examining strategies to strengthen middle leadership

- discussing changes schools needed to make in response to the new professional standards.

School leaders had also focused on strengthening whole-school systems, such as enhancing the use of data, examining learner tracking systems, and strengthening school self-evaluation. Other work had looked on transition arrangements/planning.

At the same time, the SIGs had provided opportunities for school leaders to reflect on what steps they needed to take to strengthen practitioner professional development. This aspect of their work included identifying the right focus for professional development at various levels (whole-school, sub-groups within schools, and individual teacher level). These discussions had informed subsequent dialogue with challenge advisers to broker links between schools to deliver appropriate professional development activities.

At the same time, the decision to extend the range of practitioners involved in the SIGs by enabling classroom teachers to become involved has led to a much broader engagement with these activities. This was something which stakeholders acknowledged was a positive development.

Schools which had participated in Peer Enquiry work described the focus of their work which included:

- modelling pedagogical practice
- developing school leadership
- examining ways of strengthening school systems
- strengthening practitioner professional development
- reflecting on professional practice/pedagogy
- addressing issues concerning learners' wellbeing
- discussing ideas about how to improve the learning environment.

This was another aspect of the Central South Challenge which had developed since the first wave of interviews, and was valued for the way it enabled groups of schools to develop an in-depth programme of activities that drew on each other's interests and expertise.

#### 2.4.4 Overall focus of the work

Taken together, the activities described above have increased school leaders' confidence to take the lead in developing systemic school improvement in the region. They have developed capacity for mutual challenge and support. They have also nurtured schools' analytical skills, for example in understanding the developmental needs of individual schools and groups of schools collectively. Schools are becoming more analytical about their own needs. The work has fostered an understanding of the level of granularity which is required to ensure that it is effective. There is also evidence that those who are participating in the work have developed a deeper engagement with

professional matters (pedagogy, leadership styles, curriculum development etc).

It is evident that the Consortium itself has changed its way of working in response to the school-led model. During the first wave of interviews it was suggested (particularly by senior managers at the Consortium and by some senior local authority officers, that CSC needed to give schools freedom to innovate and develop their own approaches as part of the work to give them the confidence to move towards a school-led model of improvement. The Consortium has developed its quality-assurance work, for example by ensuring that schools provide appropriate challenge and support to each other. This reflected the need for school-led approaches to be underpinned by robust quality assurance. At the same time, the system-wide intelligence held by the Consortium is being used to identify beneficial collaborations and broker appropriate school-led partnerships.

## 2.5 What is the impact on teaching and learning to date as a result of school-to-school work?

Interviewees referred to the need to capture the way the school-led improvement work was influencing teaching and learning in its broadest sense. They also referred to the need to differentiate between the direct and indirect impact of the various forms of collaboration in which schools were involved.

### 2.5.1 Perceptions of impact: school capacity

Interviewees with strategic perspectives both in the Consortium and in the local authorities noted that some schools were overcoming the 'dependency culture' which they had perceived in the past and that they had made progress towards greater self-sufficiency. However, they recognised that this was not the case across the whole of the Central South region and that there was a need to continue to build capacity. Staff with strategic perspectives believed that the work needed to be developed further in order to focus more on developing practice.

They also recognised that the collaborative work that was being promoted was an important part of a broader effort to develop school capacity for self-improvement. It was not always possible to measure its immediate effect or to measure the specific influence of the Consortium's work to develop a school-led model. However, evidence from the Consortium's own monitoring processes (for example, school self-evaluations and challenge adviser reports) indicated that the quality of school leadership was strengthening and that leaders (broadly defined) were more confident in driving improvements on their schools.

The view of the school leaders was that they had been given opportunities to reflect on the most effective ways of promoting professional learning. The work had developed over the previous 18 months and was now much more focused than in the past. Meetings were no longer seen as an opportunity for a general professional conversation and were addressing specific issues in areas like teaching and learning, how to support pupils to fulfil their potential, and school leadership.

The majority of interviewees (in the Consortium and the local authorities, and school leaders) believed that the biggest impact of the work had been on school leadership, including examples where schools had developed their leadership capacity by involving greater numbers of staff and enabling them to take work forward, especially in the primary sector.

### 2.5.2 Perceptions of impact: professional engagement

School leaders described how the activities undertaken through the Central South challenge were fostering the notion of a whole-school culture of professional reflection. This was evident in the way practitioners came together to reflect on pedagogy, curriculum and leadership.

They felt that the work had increased the confidence of schools to work in partnership and had strengthened the networks of schools within their region. A representative comment was that schools had developed a better understanding of what was happening beyond their own walls. This was contributing towards a culture in which schools were becoming more inter-dependent, which represented a major change from the previous culture of independence.

Overall, they felt that the level of discussions between schools was becoming much deeper. This was creating a culture where schools challenged each other and where schools were given peer corroboration of what they were doing effectively.

School leaders also described ways in which the work undertaken across the four types of activity had helped to promote practitioners' use of data. Specific examples were given where teachers had refined the way they used pupil-level data to respond more effectively to their needs, for example when deciding how to tailor their provision to support reading and maths programmes.

They gave examples of the way that the focus of the professional dialogue had evolved. These included:

- a move away from a focus on children who were on the borderlines of a target grade to discussions about teaching and learning more broadly
- examples where the Peer Enquiry had led to the creation of a clear action plan for schools that responded to their development needs

- practitioners were getting used to approaches such as the learning walks and were developing the skills to both give and receive constructive criticism
- the work had helped to develop practitioners' ability to interpret practice they had seen to the needs of their own schools.

Challenge advisors and school leaders noted that they were having more open conversations than had been the case in the past. This was felt to have had a direct invaluable on practice and how practitioners thought about their work which was seen by some to be the biggest impact of the work.

They believed that the work had encouraged a greater willingness on the part of practitioners to share their practice and to engage in open discussion about how they worked. This prompted 'internal challenge' because they had been encouraged to reflect on practice and to challenge their own practice in light of the discussions with their peers.

It was also noted that the verification of practice, knowing that the kind of approaches which were being taken were the right ones, were often invaluable. However, few school leaders said they had engaged with research evidence, a view which was echoed by challenge advisors), and this remained an under-developed feature of the model and this was considered to be a feature of the work which could be enhanced on future.

In general, school leaders felt that the work they did within the Consortium (including opportunities to collaborate with schools in other local authorities) was more beneficial than other partnerships (such as the national 'families of school' work). However, school leaders insisted that there was no point collaborating with others for its own sake and that school partnerships should be used to address genuine issues rather than in order to satisfy a criterion or expectation.

### 2.5.3 Perceptions of impact: learners

During the discussions, individual school leaders were able to describe examples where the changes introduced as a result of the work in which they had been involved through the Central South Challenge had impacted on learners' outcomes. The examples they gave included:

- the way changes to school pastoral systems had resulted in improved support systems
- changes to schools' tracking systems to enable them to use existing data more effectively
- the introduction of new materials to support teaching and learning, that were considered more effective
- changes to pedagogy, including instances where learners had become more active learners, by reflecting and identifying their own needs

- examples where practitioners had refined their practice to tailor teaching and learning more accurately to respond to their learners' needs.

Such work had been done in the context of broader work to refine the way schools addressed the LNF, the Digital Literacy Framework, and the work to develop the new curriculum.

School leaders recognised that the evidence for impact on learners' progression and attainment was much weaker. However, it was clear that the school-to-school work nurtured by the Consortium had fostered a culture which had a positive influence on practice which interviewees considered would have an impact on standards and attainment.

#### 2.5.4 Potential indicators

In light of these discussions with school leaders about the challenges associated with attributing impact, the focus groups explored what evidence could be used as a means of coming to firm conclusions about the impact which the work is having.

A range of potential measures was suggested by interviewees as proxy indicators by which the impact of the changes on learners across the region could be measured. These included:

- Estyn inspection grades
- school categorisation (individually as part of schools' own performance and collectively across the region as a proxy measurement for system-wide impact)
- staff retention rates
- staff attendance rates
- recruitment statistics.

They also suggested that in broader terms, schools' self-evaluation reports could be used to monitor the impact of this work. At the same time, they noted that the quality of schools' own self-evaluations should be monitored as a way of measuring the extent to which schools were developing their own capacity to identify strengths and areas for development.

Such data, it was suggested, could be set in context by more qualitative evidence about factors like:

- whether heads are more confident in delegating responsibility
- the extent to which deputy headteachers are able to lead
- the willingness of staff to upskill and take part in work with other schools.

Qualitative evidence could also help to identify factors such as whether leaders had engaged in the work and the depth of their engagement.

However, while these suggestions offer ways of measuring impact at a system level, none of the proposed methods would be able to answer the key question about the impact the work is having on learners' progression and attainment and, specifically, on those eligible for free school meals. It is therefore likely that existing measures of learner attainment and, crucially, their wellbeing, offer the best proxy indicators of the impact of collaboration. Such an approach would have to be qualified in light of a range of other important influences at school, local authority, regional and national level. However, the Central South Consortium is not alone in this respect given that the challenge of attributing impact to school-led methods of school improvement is common to all systems that have adopted this method of working.

The Consortium has gone a step further by commissioning an annual Pupil Survey which measures pupils' experiences of, and satisfaction with, their learning in the classroom and their learning experiences in relation to *A Curriculum for Wales – a curriculum for life*. This data will provide a useful set of indicators of learners' perceptions alongside other indicators.

## 2.6 What are the opportunities for and the barriers to progression?

### 2.6.1 Overview

The discussions suggest that school representatives across the region are becoming convinced that a school-led model of improvement offers the most effective way of raising standards and of responding to learners' needs. This echoes the consensus that was evident during the first wave of interviews and represents a major change from the historic 'culture of dependency' which the majority of stakeholders believed had characterised schools' mindsets in the past.

The evidence gathered in 2017 confirms what was found in 2015 that schools are developing the capacity to self-evaluate (with the assistance of challenge advisors and others who provide an external perspective). They are also working together through a range of partnerships. The discussions suggested that the level of engagement with professional issues is deepening. In general, schools are more confident about taking forward their own priorities and areas for development. The involvement of a broader range of practitioners, in particular deputy and assistant headteachers, has also increased capacity to engage in the work.

The work which is promoted by the Consortium has continued alongside other forms of school-based collaboration, most notably the work of the Pioneer Networks in the region. This has provided further impetus for the school-to-school model of working and has contributed to its acceptance by schools and other practitioners.

Even so, it is clear that not all schools are convinced of the value of linking with other schools. Some continue to believe that practitioners' focus should be on their own schools' needs. Others continue to struggle with the resource implications of any working arrangements that require practitioners to commit to being away from their school. These factors, together with the possibility that the work could lose momentum unless it is being constantly refreshed in light of schools' needs, were identified as important barriers to the success of a school-led model of school improvement in the region.

### 2.6.2 Moving forward

The Consortium is strengthening the way it identifies schools causing concern and the related issue of the way challenge advisors come to judgements about teaching and leadership. It is also undertaking work to evaluate the impact of support strategies. Key themes which it has identified include:

- learners who are eFSM
- boys' underachievement in languages
- addressing the needs of vulnerable schools
- MAT provision.

The staff and learner surveys which it has commissioned will provide longitudinal data of perceptions which can inform the way the Consortium and the schools which it serves will develop its systems in future. This is in the context of on-going work to ensure that the Consortium continues to provide robust challenge to schools and to develop leadership capacity. The Consortium's own priorities recognise the need for synergy between the work being taken forward in schools with broader issues relating to learner wellbeing and community cohesion.

The discussions with school leaders suggest that these priorities are aligned to their own (as individual schools and collectively in groups). They indicated that they are keen to develop the system leadership behaviours on which future success will depend. At the same time, they want to create a constant, live process that will enable them to review progress, identify new challenges, and respond to those needs. This, schools asserted, was essential if the school-led model was to avoid the danger of repeating the same discussions in a way that was stale and unresponsive to schools' needs.

They emphasised the need for the work in which they were involved to be underpinned by robust quality-assurance measures that are applied consistently. This calls for an evidence-based approach that provides the discipline of ensuring that there is evidence to support the approaches being taken and verifying that what they are doing is in line with what has been identified as effective practice elsewhere.

School leaders also emphasised that the role of the Consortium (and challenge advisers in particular) should continue to support the work by



maintaining an awareness of strengths, expertise, and capacity, and maintaining the brokerage function.

At the same time, school leaders considered that the Consortium and individual schools need to demonstrate the benefits of the school-led model of improvement. They considered this to be a fundamental requirement if the school-led model was to become embedded as a school improvement model across the region.

The need to continue to involve a broader group of practitioners in the work was noted by school leaders. They felt that the decision to broaden the membership of SIG groups to include a wider range of practitioners had given the work added impetus. Some believed that this could be taken further by continuing to engage and support the development of more staff.

### 3. Overarching conclusions

This report presents the outcomes of the second and final wave of focus group interviews with school leaders in the Central South region. Broadly speaking, the discussions indicate that the progress towards a school-led model identified in 2015 has gathered pace. The philosophy underpinning a school-led model is becoming embedded in schools' thinking and that of Consortium staff, notably challenge advisors. The kind of discussions which interviewees described suggest that there is a deeper level of engagement with professional issues, especially around school leadership, pedagogy, and how to ensure whole-school systems are robust and fit for purpose. On balance, schools are engaging with these developments.

The discussions also suggested that stakeholders' engagement (specifically, that of school leaders and challenge advisors), with the school-led model has strengthened. Interviewees believed that the schools which were involved in the work were engaging at a deeper level and they referred to discussions around practice as evidence for this. However, they insisted that not all schools were involved in the work, and it remained the case that some were more engaged than others.

Each of the models of collaboration was perceived to be working effectively, in their different ways, by the majority of those who were interviewed. The partnership-based activities (SIGs, Peer Enquiry and Pathfinders) had developed their own impetus since the first wave of interviews. SIGs, in particular, benefited from the involvement of a broader group of stakeholders.

Those who had used the Hub school model referred to ways in which it could be developed further. In particular, they emphasised the need for schools to have confidence in the quality of what was being delivered and for the provision to be tailored to the needs of participating schools.

The work was impacting on practice. Interviewees described how they had modified their approaches to teaching and learning, reviewed systems, and altered ways of leading a school in light of what they had experienced through working with other schools. However, while this was perceived to have helped to raise standards across the Consortium, school representatives were not confident that they could attribute changes in learners' performance directly or solely to this work.

The data which is being collected by the Consortium, taken alongside other evaluative work will provide a valuable evidence base in future. These outcomes will need to be monitored in order to identify further refinements that may be needed to produce the evidence of impact which is required.







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