Estyn report of Central South Consortium

Summary

1. Estyn inspected the Central South Consortium in March 2016. It was the first Consortium to be inspected under a new Consortia inspection framework.

2. The report was mostly positive recognising the scale of improvement across schools within the Central South region since the Consortium working began in Wales in 2012. It gave 'good' judgements for leadership, self evaluation and improvement planning and partnerships.

3. Judgements for support for school improvement and resource management remained 'adequate' which in Estyn terms means 'strengths outweigh areas for improvement'. There were four recommendations for the Consortium to take on board ahead of a likely revisit by Estyn in the autumn of 2017.

Recommendation

4. Members of the Joint Committee should:

   a. Note the inspection report and recommendations (Annex A);
   b. Comment on actions to address recommendations (Annex B);
   c. Consider whether they wish to take this report to their respective Cabinets for information;
   d. Confirm arrangements for Scrutiny meetings whereby the Consortium will report on progress to each authority in the early Spring term.

Background to the Consortium

5. Consortia were established by the previous Labour government in 2012 and have taken some time to become established across Wales. Consortia are funded to deliver school improvement services on behalf of Local Authorities. This means providing challenge and support in the form of a Challenge Adviser to each school and commissioning sources of support for schools to draw upon in their improvement planning.

6. Central South Consortium covers 400 schools across Wales and over a third of the children in Wales. It is one of the most deprived regions in Wales and in 2012 it was one of the lowest performing regions. All five authorities were in a form of Estyn monitoring.

7. Since 2012 the region has seen the fastest improvement of any in Wales. Results in all key stages have risen to or above the national average and the pace of improvement at key stage four has been more than double that seen nationally. At the same time all five authorities have been removed from

monitoring by Estyn and in all cases the contribution of the Consortium was noted.

8. In 2014 the five authorities in Central South Consortium launched 'The Central South Wales Challenge' which set out a school led strategy for improvement. This was designed to identify and support schools to lead improvement across the region, at a system level and at a school level. At the same time there were changes to the challenge adviser function and many more seconded head teachers were encouraged to become challenge advisers.

9. Estyn inspected the Consortium in February/March 2016 under their new framework for Consortia published the previous autumn. It was the first of the four consortia to be inspected. All four will have been inspected before the end of the summer term 2016 (at time of writing no other consortia have had a published report.)

10. The inspection took two weeks and involved 9 inspectors. More than 50 head teachers and governors were interviewed as were all Council Leaders and Cabinet Members, Chief Executives, Directors, S151 officers, the senior team of the Consortium and many staff. The inspection was supported by a survey of all head teachers and governors, to which more than 50% of schools responded, which was undertaken in January.

11. The report (Annex A) was published on the 26th May and it is expected that all consortia will be revisited to measure progress against their recommendations from the autumn of 2017 onwards.

Outcomes of the inspection

12. The report made five judgements within its framework with a context section on performance and outcomes. Against each areas the judgements were:

    a. Support for School Improvement: Adequate
    b. Leadership: Good
    c. Improving quality: Good
    d. Partnerships: Good
    e. Resource Management: Adequate

13. The report recognised the rapid improvement across the five authorities in the region, the fastest improvement nationally and that the Consortium was now sitting at or above the national average in all indicators. However it also notes that performance across the local authorities is 'too variable'.

'In 2015, over half of the schools in the region are in the higher 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools for all the main indicators in the

Foundation Phase and key stages 2, 3 and 4. This is the only region where this is the case. Overall, performance in this region has improved at a faster rate than in the other regions over the last three years, although for several indicators this has been from a low base.

14. The report recognised a number of areas of strength in the way that Consortium operates and delivers impact. In particular it noted:

    a. Increased consistency and quality of challenge advisers, use of data and implementation of the categorisation process;

    b. The wide range of professional learning opportunities for schools across the region delivered as part of the self improving school system;

    c. Effective leadership and appropriate governance of the Consortium by the five authorities working together;

    d. Effective self evaluation and improvement planning processes reflected in the Consortium Business plan 2016/17;

    e. Clarity of vision and strategy within the self improving school system strategy work and the strength of engagement with head teachers and authorities, also the effective use of resources.

'The consortium has a clear vision and strategy to improve schools that is understood by most stakeholders and underpins the support for school improvement well. Almost all schools across the region are engaging purposefully with school-to-school working.'

'Over the last two years, the consortium has developed into a reflective organisation that is committed to evaluating and improving its own practice and performance.'

15. There were also a number of areas for improvement in the four recommendations within the report. These were to:

    1. Ensure that school improvement services address the variability of performance across schools and local authorities, particularly at key stage 4

    2. Improve the accuracy of the evaluations of schools by challenge advisers in order to ensure a greater focus on improving teaching and leadership

    3. Strengthen the procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of school improvement work

    4. Evaluate progress against the regional consortium's operational plans more effectively.

Delivering on the recommendations

16. The consortium has reviewed action plans against the recommendations and added to them where necessary. Attached at Annex B is a summary of each of the recommendations with actions and impact against them. These sit

within the business plan and are monitored monthly as part of our self evaluation processes.

17. Following the inspection stakeholders and Directors in the region carried out a stocktake to review progress and to identify further areas where focus was needed. These included:

   a. A need for a focus on strengthening leadership succession planning and future leadership capacity also recruitment of core subject (mathematics particularly) teachers in the region;
   b. A focus on developing pedagogy and joint practice development at teacher level through school to school working;
   c. A focus on engagement in particular with teachers, governors and elected Members about the role of the consortia and impact of school to school working;
   d. A focus on consistent intervention and a sharp response to schools which do not make sufficiently rapid progress;
   e. A need to review the role of challenge advisers with a view to increasing impact and sharpening reporting;
   f. A need to engage with pace on national strategies and agendas in the region in a way that builds capacity and streamlines change management.

18. Actions arising from these areas have also been reflected in our action plans underpinning the business plan which are monitored monthly.

Risks

19. There are risks to the delivery of these recommendations in the next year particularly including:

   a. The implementation of the new qualifications for core subjects at Key stage 4 may well destabilise the improvement seen across the region hitting schools which serve deprived areas hardest. This is being monitored and we are working with these schools particularly to support their planning;
   b. Leadership capacity and particularly capacity to recruit core subject staff remains a significant issue for the region. The four consortia are working together on a national recruitment campaign for the autumn;
   c. National priorities change as the new government establishes itself leading to reduced impact and a need to further communicate strategies and progress;
   d. Financial resources remain tight and will become more so. The Consortium is taking a small cut to revenue resources in 2016/17 and

17/18 and judge this to be manageable, but major changes to grant will affect our ability to deliver school to school strategies for improvement. We are working with Welsh Government to reflect and address these issues within the context of increasing delegation to schools.

20. These risks are on the CSC risk register and being monitored closely.

Next Steps

21. The Consortium has reviewed action plans as set out in this report and will report against progress to the Advisory Board and the Joint Committee termly.

22. Each Scrutiny Committee also receives an annual report in the late autumn/early Spring term from the Consortium which will also focus on progress against these recommendations. It would be helpful if Authorities could confirm the date of the Scrutiny meetings to invite the Consortium to account for impact in the authority.

23. It is recommended that Cabinet Members take this report to their respective Cabinets for information.

Attachments:

Annex A: Estyn published report for Central South Consortium.

Annex B: Summary table of recommendations, action and impact.

Hannah Woodhouse

13th June 2016

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

WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

A report on the quality of the school improvement services provided by the Central South Consortium

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February 2016

by

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

Publication date: 27/05/2016

Context

Regional profile

Central South Consortium provides school improvement services for a region of five local authorities: Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan.

The number of pupils of compulsory school age in the region in 2015 was 111,121. This represents 31% of all pupils in Wales. There are 398 maintained schools in the region, 25% of all maintained schools in Wales (PLASC, 2015).

In 2015, 20.7% of pupils in the region are eligible for free school meals. This is above the Wales average and only 0.1 percentage point below that of the region with the highest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals.

In the region, 11% of people aged three and over say that they can speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 19% (2011 Census, ONS).

As of 31 December 2015, ethnic minorities account for 7% of the population in the region, and this is just above the Wales average.

As of 31 March 2015, 2,015 children in the region are looked after by a local authority and this represents 36% of looked-after children in Wales.

Performance profile

There has been strong improvement in the outcomes for pupils in the main indicators for performance in all the key stages over the last three years across the five local authorities served by the central south consortium. However, since September 2012, only a minority of secondary schools inspected have been judged good or better for their standards. This is a marginally lower proportion compared to the rest of Wales.

In 2015, over half of the schools in the region are in the higher 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools for all the main indicators in the Foundation Phase and key stages 2, 3 and 4. This is the only region where this is the case. Overall, performance in this region has improved at a faster rate than in the other regions over the last three years, although for several indicators this has been from a low base.

Over the last three years, performance in the Foundation Phase indicator and key stage 2 core subject indicator has increased at the fastest rate in Wales. When inspected, a higher proportion of primary schools in central south Wales have been judged good or better for their standards compared to those in the rest of Wales.

The proportion of pupils gaining the expected level in the core subject indicator at key stage 3 has improved rapidly in central south Wales over the last three years, and at a faster rate than the Wales average. In 2015, performance was close to being the highest in Wales. The majority of schools in the region are in the higher 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools.

The percentage of pupils achieving the level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics has improved at a particularly rapid pace over the last three years. Performance in every local authority in the region met or exceeded the benchmark target set by the Welsh Government in 2015. Almost two-thirds of schools in the region are in the higher 50% compared to similar schools, and only around one-sixth of schools are in the bottom 25% when compared to similar schools. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved at a faster rate than in the other regions over the last three years, albeit from a very low base. The gap in performance between girls and boys is the smallest for any of the four regions. However, boys' performance across the local authorities is far too variable.

At key stage 4, performance in the average capped wider points score has improved well over the last three years. Performance in four of the five local authorities in the region met or exceeded the benchmark target set by the Welsh Government in 2015. Just over half the schools in the region are in the higher 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools, and one-fifth of schools are in the bottom 25% compared to similar schools.

Although performance in the level 1 threshold at key stage 4 has improved, performance in the region has been the lowest in Wales for the last two years. However, despite this, half of the secondary schools are in the higher 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools.

The proportion of pupils achieving five A* or A grades or at GCSE or equivalent has been above the Wales average for the last two years, having improved at the fastest rate across the four regions. However, performance across the local authorities is too variable.

Performance in English is particularly strong in the region. Performance at level 2 is above the Wales average in 2015 and nearly two-thirds of secondary schools are in the higher 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools.

Performance in mathematics is the weakest of the core subjects, although central south Wales is the most improved region over the last three years.

Attendance has improved well in the region in recent years, increasing at a slightly faster rate than the Wales average. Attendance rates in a majority of primary and secondary schools place them in the higher 50% compared to similar schools in Wales.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure that school improvement services address the variability of performance across schools and local authorities, particularly at key stage 4

R2 Improve the accuracy of the evaluations of schools by challenge advisers in order to ensure a greater focus on improving teaching and leadership

R3 Strengthen the procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of school improvement work

R4 Evaluate progress against the regional consortium's operational plans more effectively

Main findings

Support for School Improvement: Adequate

The consortium has a clear vision and strategy to improve schools that is understood by most stakeholders and underpins the support for school improvement well. Almost all schools across the region are engaging purposefully with school-to-school working.

The consortium's 'Support and Challenge Framework' provides useful guidance for challenge advisers, local authority officers and schools. The framework outlines the process for categorising schools clearly. It also indicates how challenge advisers should work with schools in different categories of support. Following an evaluation, the consortium has recently reviewed the framework to emphasise schools' self-evaluation and improvement planning. They have also focused more sharply on the improvement priorities for the region. This appropriately includes raising the achievement of vulnerable groups of pupils.

Consortium leaders are developing the arrangements for collecting data to inform school improvement processes and to improve their knowledge of schools well. This includes collecting pupils' performance data throughout the year, which allows the consortium to track progress with greater accuracy in its schools. Many challenge advisers use this data appropriately to challenge each school's view of its standards and capacity to improve, and to make informed decisions about the school's support needs.

The categorisation process is increasingly robust and fair, and identifies clearly those aspects that require improvement. The process allows for a more open dialogue between schools and the consortium and, overall, schools have a sound understanding of what to expect. In the last two years there has been a reduction in the proportion of schools requiring a higher degree of support. However, in a minority of schools, there are still significant concerns.

Most challenge advisers' reports on schools are based appropriately on first-hand evidence, such as the scrutiny of pupils' work and observations of teaching. The consortium has suitable processes to quality assure the work of challenge advisers. Senior challenge advisers make joint visits with challenge advisers and review the quality of reports to schools. These activities have improved the consistency and clarity of the reports provided to schools. However, in a few cases, challenge adviser notes of visits to schools do not focus on the most important aspects requiring improvement, such as the quality and consistency of teaching. In addition, in a few instances, reports provided to Estyn in advance of an inspection do not reflect well enough the findings of the inspection team, especially regarding the evaluation of teaching and leadership.

In many schools, challenge advisers broker support appropriately and draw well on the consortium's provision for a wide range of school-to-school support and targeted interventions.

The consortium works effectively with its local authority partners to share information about the performance of schools across the region, and to identify schools causing concern. Meetings to review the progress of schools in the highest categories of support are regular and place an appropriate emphasis on the role of the headteachers and governors to provide evidence of progress. Where there are concerns about a school's progress, the consortium acts swiftly to alert the local authority and provides timely advice to support the local authority's use of statutory powers to intervene in the school.

Teacher assessment across the region is increasingly accurate. Generally, schools are well-engaged and moderation processes have improved, helped by involvement in the national verification programme. Challenge and strategic advisers support all moderation events. The consortium has been proactive in including the Foundation Phase in their verification processes, and this provides effective support for practitioners.

To address national and regional priorities, the consortium has developed the role of strategic advisers, who lead approaches to support schools in key areas. This includes a regional strategy group to tackle poverty and disadvantage that is working with a group of schools to identify, evaluate and develop effective practice across the region. This work is well-planned, and has included commissioned research resulting in a series of best practice case studies on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. This has helped to raise schools' awareness of strategies to tackle disadvantage.

The 'Central South Wales Challenge' is the consortium's key strategy for school improvement. It provides a wide range of professional learning opportunities for schools across the region, at all levels of support, which reflect well the vision for a self-improving school system. The strategy has four main activities; School Improvement Groups (SIGs), 'Pathfinders', 'Hubs' and 'Peer enquiry,' which together form a coherent and well-designed approach to school-to-school-working.

All schools in the region belong to a SIG and most schools have engaged very positively with this activity. The SIGs provide well-structured opportunities for schools to work together on improvement priorities that are specific to their context, and to share best practice. Engagement in this work has promoted productive school-to-school working across the region.

Where more targeted school-to-school working is required, the consortium has paired a number of schools in 'Pathfinder' partnerships through which effective schools support those schools in need of improvement. This strategy has brought about improvements in many of the schools involved.

'Hub' schools provide professional learning in specific priority areas, such as teaching and leadership. There is a robust application process for schools to become hubs to ensure that the lead school has the capacity to provide support. This is a mutually beneficial process for both lead schools and those attending the programmes. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this work.

The consortium has rolled out two pilot cohorts of 'peer enquiry' in the region. This involves two head teachers and a deputy head who are invited into a third school to review self-evaluation and improvement planning, including lesson observation and talking to learners and the senior leadership team. It is a method of building leadership capacity and reflection and improving self-evaluation between peer head teachers. The consortium has developed a clear methodology for its approach to peer enquiry and there are early indications that is having a positive effect on improving leadership capacity. However procedures for evaluating its impact are underdeveloped.

These support opportunities have motivated teachers across the region to become more active in and reflective on their own learning, and to support the development of others. Although participation has been high, and teachers have welcomed these opportunities for improvement, the procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of this work on standards, teaching and leadership are underdeveloped. The consortium is beginning to address this shortcoming.

There is a wide range of provision to improve literacy and numeracy in schools, including core support for curriculum developments. It also addresses the needs of specific groups of pupils, and provides valuable approaches to develop school-to-school support to address the particular needs of individual schools. Improvement in English has generally been good but the impact on pupils' standards in mathematics has been more limited.   Overall, schools rely too heavily on interventions in literacy and numeracy to improve outcomes rather than on the development of teaching and leadership in these areas.

Following an extensive review of provision in the Foundation Phase, the consortium established the Foundation Phase Alliance, a group of specialist schools and settings for the Foundation Phase. The schools are committed to delivering professional learning events to share their good practice. Case studies show examples of improved practice. However, this work is at an early stage of development.

The consortium is developing a comprehensive suite of programmes to improve leadership across the region. This includes a broad range of programmes for headteachers at various stages of their careers to improve their practice, to gain the skills to support other headteachers, or to lead more than one school. School leaders show a strong commitment to developing a school-led self-improving system, and there has been a high take-up of leadership programmes. The Central South Wales Challenge (CSW) strategy group of headteachers provides a useful forum for school leaders to discuss and develop the school-to-school working system. Furthermore, there are valuable opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills through the CSW Challenge, by leading school improvements in the SIGs and in 'Hub' schools. These development opportunities are beginning to build capacity for improvement across the region, although it is too early to identify any sustained impact on schools.

The recruitment of a regional lead officer for governor training has improved the consortium's capacity to work with local authorities to provide support for governors.

Leadership: Good

Strategic leadership and management in the consortium are strong.

Senior leaders in the five local authorities and the senior management team in the consortium have a clear shared strategic vision for the regional school improvement service. These elected members and officers have worked effectively together to develop this strategic vision and to put in place the appropriate governance structure to drive this forward.

The consortium's governance structure is set out clearly in the recently revised legal agreement, which takes good account of the Welsh Government's guidance on implementing the National Model for School Improvement. This agreement confirms that the consortium is a jointly provided school improvement service and establishes an effective framework that allocates governance responsibilities and accountability to a joint committee, an advisory board, strategic and operational management groups and a host authority.

This agreement directs appropriate representation from each local authority at lead director, chief executive, and lead member levels. Every local authority is represented, and responsibilities are distributed between the five local authorities with key posts rotating periodically. All of the five local authorities engage with the governance structure well and have taken up their allotted representative posts and duties.

The joint committee and the advisory board provide clear direction to the consortium's managing director and senior management team. These groups provide the means by which the local authorities' senior leaders exercise their oversight of the work of the consortium. The consortium's officers and the members of these two groups understand their respective roles and responsibilities, and they generally discharge these well. The consortium's managing director and senior management team are also supported well by other groups of stakeholders such as the education directors' strategic group, the headteachers' steering group, and the governors' steering group.

The consortium has a clear and well-articulated vision for their self-improving schools model. The vision has been communicated effectively through regular reports, newsletters, briefings and its website and this has led to a high level of 'buy-in' by all stakeholders. However, not all school governors and elected members understand well enough the role of the consortium in raising pupils' standards and the outcomes it has achieved so far. The consortium is aware of this and is currently setting out in more detail how its vision will develop over the medium term in line with national expectations.

As well as working together well to develop the work of the consortium as a joint school improvement service, the chief executives and directors of education of the five local authorities are increasingly sharing other areas of common interest. This has led to improvements in governor support, human resource services, and data analysis. The five local authority chief executives have also recently commissioned a

useful scoping exercise to identify other education services where joint working may bring added value.

The consortium's current business plan sets out well the strategic goals for the consortium within a three-year vision, as well as its high level goals for the current year. These take good account of both the Welsh Government's school improvement priorities and those for the region.

The consortium has worked well with the local authority scrutiny committees to improve the impact of their oversight and challenge. There is now in place an agreed cycle of visits by the managing director and chair of the joint committee to each scrutiny committee. During these visits, the consortium presents a report setting out clearly its evaluation of the outcomes from the work of the consortium for the local authority's schools and pupils. The consortium has also worked effectively with each scrutiny committee to provide data and related information, as well as training, in order to help the committee hold schools and officers to account for performance. However, scrutiny chairs remain unclear about which aspects of the consortium's work they can and cannot scrutinise more directly.

Improving quality: Good

Over the last two years, the consortium has developed into a reflective organisation that is committed to evaluating and improving its own practice and performance. Senior leaders take good account of the views of a wide range of stakeholders and adjust plans and processes when necessary to ensure these meet needs more effectively. This is enabling leaders to secure increasingly accurate self-evaluation arrangements and improvements to the current business planning processes.

Leaders and managers use a wide range of first-hand information well to inform the self-evaluation process. This includes the careful analysis of data from consortium to individual pupil level. As a result, the consortium has agreed a set of appropriate key performance indicators against which it will measure progress over a three-year cycle.

The current self-evaluation report provides a fair and balanced view of the consortium's overall performance. A wide range of stakeholders contribute to the self-evaluation process and their views help to inform the final report. At the end of each key question, the report provides a useful evaluative summary of the areas the consortium identifies as in need of improvement.

Operational action plans for 2015-2016 reflect work streams required by the Welsh Government and contain a brief outline of key milestones over the next three years. The overarching business plan also includes annexes that set out how the consortium tailors its work to support each local authority's additional priorities. These plans focus on important areas for improvement and include time scales and costings but do not always identify clearly a lead individual to be held to account for progress. Overall, the actions in the plans lack clarity and specific success criteria. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to measure progress accurately.   Senior leaders monitor progress regularly against the actions and key priorities in the operational plans through a colour-coded system, but this tends to focus on process

rather than outcomes. Other arrangements to monitor the progress of the 2015-2016 operational plans are often too complicated and are unclear about what is being measured.

For the 2016-2017 business planning process, leaders have taken good account of the recommendations in the Estyn report of June 2015 'Improving Schools through Regional Consortia'. The overarching business plan sets out clear performance targets for schools for the next three years at each key stage. In addition, there are precise targets to narrow the gap between the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils and for raising attendance in primary and secondary schools. These targets underpin effectively the three main improvement priorities in the overarching business plan. The targets focus well on raising standards in literacy and numeracy, supporting schools to become self-improving and ensuring that the consortium is a high performing organisation. These improvement priorities form a sound basis for the 2016-2017 operational action plans.

The operational plans link well to the consortium's agreed key priorities and the self-evaluation report. They contain explicit performance targets for a three-year period. Each strategic activity details clear actions with specific success criteria and timescales and a named responsible leader. There are appropriate costings to support the implementation of actions but because budget level planning is built on a single-year model dependent upon Welsh Government funding, these costings are appropriate for a one-year period only. Good quality assurance procedures ensure that all the plans contain the required information in a consistent format and meet quality standards. These plans provide a sound foundation to move work forward across the consortium.

There are appropriate procedures and processes to ensure that the consortium identifies and deals with risks at different levels.

The consortium is strengthening its performance management arrangements for individual members of staff. However, agreed objectives and identified success criteria are not always precise enough to enable senior leaders to judge accurately the quality of the work of their teams. There are appropriate arrangements in place across the consortium to deal with underperformance through agreed informal and formal processes.

Partnerships: Good

The consortium has successfully developed strong relationships with a range of partners. This has led to a shared understanding of strategic priorities and a clear commitment to working together to improve standards for all pupils.

The consortium has developed an effective partnership with its schools. This is enabling it to move purposefully towards delivering its vision for a self-improving school system.

There is a positive working relationship between consortium and local authority senior managers. Directors, chief executives, senior officers and elected members realise the benefits that can be gained from working within a wider region, and

demonstrate a clear willingness to explore other opportunities for greater collaboration both with the consortium and with each other.

The consortium is developing its partnership with governors through the development of a governor steering group, governor briefings and mandatory data training. This is helping governors to gain a better understanding of their role. The consortium has started to involve experienced governors in school-to-school support through the appointment of consultant governors.

The consortium is developing its partnership appropriately with a range of local authority services. Close working with human resource (HR) departments and trade unions across the five authorities has resulted in the development of shared capability and performance management arrangements and this is improving the support that schools receive.

The appointment of regional co-ordinators for HR, governance, attendance and looked-after children is facilitating increased collaboration and sharing of good practice between the five authorities. However, overall, this development is at an early stage.

The consortium has appropriately recognised the need to develop closer working between challenge advisers and inclusion staff to share information about vulnerable groups of pupils. Across the region there are examples of useful collaboration between these services in terms of joint meetings and visits to schools. A recently formed inclusion strategy group is providing valuable opportunities for managers in the five authorities to develop collaborative working and greater consistency across the region. However, the collation and analysis of data about vulnerable pupils are at an early stage of development.

Partnership with the diocesan authorities has improved, with regular meetings between the diocesan education directors and consortium managers. This has led to improved dialogue with senior officers about issues relating to faith schools.

There has been an improvement in the communication and working relationships between consortium challenge advisers and Schools Challenge Cymru advisers. This includes more effective sharing of data and reports as well as regular attendance at meetings.

The consortium has developed a few useful links with external partners. For example, links with higher education institutions have enabled the consortium to develop a range of professional development opportunities for new and experienced headteachers.

Collaboration with the other consortia has provided useful opportunities for sharing good practice. Examples of these include the developments relating to Welsh medium secondary education and the 'Valleys Project'. However, it is too early to evaluate the impact of this work.

Resource management: Adequate

The consortium has sound financial management processes in place, which allow for budgets for core funding and grant expenditure to be set robustly and monitored

carefully. Costs are kept under regular and tight review by consortium staff, education directors and the joint committee. The consortium is managing the challenges of grant allocation well. This is helped by solid relationships between finance officers in the consortium and local authorities.

The link between the business planning process and spending decisions is developing well. The consortium is making good use of data to allocate resources against key priorities. As part of its priority of school-led support, the consortium increased the proportion of grant funding delegated to schools from 2015-2016 compared with previous years. This proportion is higher than Welsh Government requirements.

The local authority core funding to the consortium is lower than set out in the Welsh Government's National Model for Regional Working, although this is partly because local authorities continue to provide certain services such as HR support. The consortium has been proactive in identifying efficiencies by reducing both administration costs and duplication of work and increasing external income from the use of its office space. This has enabled the consortium to reduce the local authority core funding by 5% for 2016-2017 and a further 5% for 2017-2018 without impacting on core services. Plans are in place to review other areas for collaboration across the region, such as governor support, further to reduce costs and improve the effectiveness of the services.

The consortium has started to assess its value for money, although it recognises that there is still further work to do to develop this process and demonstrate that the use of resources is having the best possible impact on outcomes. The consortium has used the results of its value for money reviews to reconfigure particular services such as Foundation Phase support. This has led to a reduction in costs in this area. However, it is too early to assess the impact of these changes to determine if they have delivered better value for money.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

Iwan Roberts	Reporting Inspector
Sarah Lewis	Team Inspector
Caroline Rees	Team Inspector
Rhona Edwards	Team Inspector
Mark Campion	Team Inspector
Gerard Kerslake	Team Inspector
Jassa Scott	Team Inspector
Margaret Elisabeth Davies	Team Inspector
Sophie Knott	WAO
Sue Walker	Nominee

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available on the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Glossary of terms

National Curriculum

Expected National Curriculum levels

- By the end of the Foundation Phase, at the age of seven, pupils are expected to reach Foundation Phase outcome 5 and the more able outcome 6.
- By the end of the key stage 2, at the age of eleven, learners are expected to reach level 4 and the more able to reach level 5.
- By the end of the key stage 3, at the age of fourteen, learners are expected to reach level 5 and the more able to reach level 6 or level 7.

Foundation Phase indicator (FPI)

Progress in learning through the Foundation Phase is indicated by outcomes (from outcome 1 to outcome 6). The Foundation Phase indicator (FPI) relates to the expected performance in three areas of learning in the Foundation Phase: literacy, language and communication in English or Welsh first language; mathematical development; personal and social development, wellbeing and cultural diversity Pupils must achieve the expected outcome (outcome 5) in the three areas above to gain the Foundation Phase indicator.

Core subject indicator in key stages 2, 3 and 4

The core subject indicator relates to the expected performance in English or Welsh first language, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum. Learners must gain at least the expected level in either English or Welsh first language together with mathematics and science to gain the core subject indicator.

External examinations at key stage 4 or post-16

Core subject indicator – as above.

Level 1 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade D to G.

The Level 1 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grades D to G.

Level 2 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics – learners must have gained level 2 qualifications in English or Welsh first language and in mathematics as part of their threshold.

Level 3 qualification – the equivalent of an A level at A* to C.

The Level 3 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to two A levels at grade A* to E.

The **average wider points score** includes all external qualifications approved for use in Wales at the relevant age – for example at age 16 or 18. To calculate this, the total points gained by all learners in the cohort is divided by the number of learners.

The **capped average points score** only includes the best eight results for each pupil from all qualifications approved for use in Wales at age 16.

All-Wales Core Data sets

Schools and local authorities may refer to performance relative to their family of schools. These families of schools have been created to enable schools to compare their performance to similar schools across Wales. Families include schools with similar proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals, living in 20% most deprived areas of Wales, having special education needs at school action plus or statemented and with English as an additional language acquisition less than competent.

Recommendation	What are we doing?	Expected Impact

R1 Ensure that school improvement services address the variability of performance across schools and local authorities, particularly at key stage 4	✓ Improving provision of pupil level data through the establishment of a pupil level database.
	✓ Collecting schools' self-evaluation reports, improvement plans and targets much earlier in the academic year so that we are able to identify at an early stage whether the targets set will reduce variability of performance between schools and authorities.
	✓ Enabling challenge advisers to challenge expectations and the targets set where they are not high enough to ensure that:
	  • the variations against key indicators reduce;
	  • we see continuing improvement across the region in all schools.
	✓ Collecting information about pupils' progress towards targets in secondary and primary schools more readily through the year to help monitor progress.
	✓ Developing and coordinating a strategy to improve performance in secondary schools across the region both pre- and post sixteen.
	✓ Establishing an intervention strategy to achieve a consistent approach across the region that will secure improvement at pace in schools causing the greatest concern, including use of the local authority's statutory powers.
	✓ Strengthening the coordination of joint working with local authorities' inclusion services when supporting schools requiring red or amber support.
		➤ The targets in the Foundation Phase and at key stages 2 and 3 are met in 2016 as set out in the business plan at the expected level and the expected level +1.
		➤ When targets are reset for 2017 and 2018 they will demonstrate intent to reduce the variation between schools and local authorities in the following areas:
		  • the gap between boys' and girls' achievement in literacy/ English/ Welsh in all authorities and boys' literacy outcomes especially in Merthyr;
		  • girls' outcomes in mathematics in all authorities but especially in the Vale;
		  • the gap in outcomes achieve by eFSM pupils at the expected and above expected levels, especially in the Vale and RCT;
		  • the outcomes of looked after children in all authorities;
		  • the achievement of pupils with SEN particularly in Bridgend, Cardiff, RCT and the Vale;
		  • the outcomes of pupils with EAL especially in Cardiff.
		➤ The proportion of schools across the region in the top two benchmarking quarters will continue to increase to exceed two-thirds in the FP and key stage 2 and four fifths at key stage 3.
		➤ Over two-thirds of pupils will achieve the level 2+ threshold at key stage 4 in line with targets for the next three years.
		➤ The Welsh government's targets for the proportion of eFSM pupils overall achieving the level 2+ threshold

	✓ Continuing work to monitor and improve the consistency of teacher assessment. ✓ Taking action to raise standards further and improve the quality of teaching and leadership in literacy and English/ Welsh and mathematics. ✓ Increasing the supply of secondary mathematics teachers. ✓ Working with schools to improve the outcomes achieved by eFSM pupils, looked after children, more able pupils, pupils with SEN or EAL and in so doing narrowing the gaps overall on the basis of improvement by all pupils.	by 2017 will be met (37%) and by 2018 all individual secondary schools will meet the target. ➢ The number of schools where less than 50% of pupils achieve the level 2+ threshold will reduce from 18 currently to 3 by 2018. ➢ The variations in outcomes against the level 1 threshold, especially in Cardiff, will reduce significantly so that in no authority less than 97% of pupils reach this threshold by 2018. Variations in the capped points score will also reduce. ➢ When targets are reset the proportion of A*/A grades at GCSE will improve especially in Merthyr and RCT and performance will not be below the current average of 17% for the region in any authority. ➢ The proportion of pupils achieving A*/A grades at A level will improve especially in Bridgend and RCT. ➢ Over 90% of primary and secondary schools will be in the two benchmarking quarters for attendance (just over half currently in primary and two-thirds in secondary). ➢ No additional schools will require significant improvement or special measures by September 2017.
R2 Improve the accuracy of the evaluations of schools by challenge advisers in order to ensure a greater focus on improving teaching and leadership	✓ Reviewing and developing further the service's protocol, assessment criteria for writing reports and exemplar materials to ensure consistency. ✓ Making the evaluation of teaching and leadership more explicit. ✓ Ensuring this is a focus in the professional development of senior challenge advisers, challenge advisers and the strategic teams. ✓ Linking this with the performance management	➢ All report writing will meet agreed assessment criteria for quality and accuracy. ➢ There is a strong correlation between the outcomes of categorisation and inspection and this is also reflected in the comments made in challenge advisers' writing of the local authority's pre-inspection briefing reports. ➢ All challenge advisers meet nearly all or most aspects of their performance objectives.

	objectives of staff. ✓ Intensifying action to quality assure written report. ✓ Continuing the practice where senior challenge advisers accompany challenge advisers when undertaking work in schools to assure quality and promote consistency.	➢ The further improvements in the outcomes of categorisation and the reduction in the number of red and amber support schools and the increase in green and yellow will occur as set out in targets and indicated against R3 below. ➢ The progress made by amber and particularly red support schools will be strong in most cases and will meet targets as set out below.
R3 Strengthen the procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of school improvement work	✓ Review and revise the Framework for Challenge and Support to strengthen the impact of the monitoring, evaluation and brokerage activity of challenge advisers in order to meet the expectations inherent in recommendation 1 above, namely: • reducing the variations in performance between schools and authorities; • improving the performance of secondary schools; • improving the outcomes of specific groups vulnerable to underachievement. ✓ Using the regional analysis of needs that has been completed to guide the work of the hubs, SIGs and the intervention in red and amber support schools. ✓ Establishing baseline measures and success criteria at the outset to support evaluation of the impact of the support provided by: • professional learning and curriculum hubs in the English and Welsh-medium sectors, including the Foundation Phase Alliance; • lead practitioners; • SIGs;	➢ The targets as set out above against R1 are met. ➢ Strong progress is made towards achieving the improvement targets and success criteria in individual schools and groups of schools through the collaborative work of the hubs, SIGs, Foundation Phase Alliance and pathfinder partnerships. ➢ The proportion of schools whose improvement capacity is judged to be either A or B reaches 89% (primary-4% improvement), 79% (secondary- 7% improvement) 95% (special- 5% improvement) by October 2016 and continues to improve further in the following two years. ➢ The proportion of schools where leadership is judged to be at least good improves from the current baseline (70% primary, 50% secondary, 80% special) to reach 75%, 60% and over 80% respectively by September 2016 and over 90% in all cases by 2018. ➢ The proportion of schools where teaching is judged to be at least good improves from the current baseline (72% primary, 60% secondary, 80% special) to reach 76%, 67%, and over 80% respectively by September 2016 and over 90% in all cases by 2018.

	- pathfinder partnerships; - the leadership development programmes; - peer enquiry; - programmes to improve the quality of learning and teaching' consultant leaders and consultant governors. ✓ Continuing work to assess the progress of red and amber support schools against clear targets and success criteria. ✓ Implementing the research and evaluation strategy, supported by researchers from Cardiff University, integrating this with an annual plan for assessing value for money against our key strategies.	➢ The proportion of schools requiring red or amber support is reduced by a further 25% by September 2016 and reduces further in line with revised targets in each of the following two years. ➢ All schools requiring amber or red support make strong progress by the end of the academic year against the priorities in their improvement plans. ➢ All schools receiving consultant governor support make strong progress in the quality and effectiveness of governance.
R4 Evaluate progress against the regional consortium's operational plans more effectively.	✓ Providing internal challenge by continuing to monitor progress against operational action plans monthly. ✓ Refining the service's performance dashboard to evaluate noteworthy progress, barriers and risk and action in response. ✓ Ensuring that monitoring assesses progress against termly milestones as well as key actions and evaluates the extent to which improvement is occurring as intended. ✓ Providing external challenge through the meetings of the advisory board and joint committee. ✓ Implementing the service's new system – CRONFA- to improve information management.	➢ The targets in the business plan relating to reducing the variation between schools, authorities and specific groups of pupils are met as set out in the business plan and as referred to against R1 and R3 above. ➢ Monthly monitoring of progress by the performance board is robust, records strong progress against the plan's actions and milestones and derives evidence of the impact on securing improvement against the key measures. ➢ The monitoring process enables effective remedial action to be taken where there are barriers to progress. ➢ The potential effects of risk are anticipated and mitigated effectively and in a timely manner. ➢ The advisory board and joint committee provide effective challenge and support that aid the improvement process.