
Improving schools
through regional
education consortia

June 2015



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- ▲ special schools
- ▲ pupil referral units
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- ▲ Welsh for adults
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Introduction

The Welsh Government asked Estyn to produce this report for the Minister for Education and Skills in its annual remit.

The purpose of this survey is to report on the progress being made by regional education consortia (hereinafter referred to as regional consortia) to provide school improvement services. In 2014, the Welsh Government published a guidance document 'National Model for Regional Working', which outlines the government's vision of regional consortia. It also sets out the relative roles of each tier (schools, local authorities, and regional consortia) within the education system, (Welsh Government, 2014a).

Separately, the Auditor General for Wales asked Wales Audit Office staff to carry out a study on the Welsh Government's approach to improving schools through regional consortia. Wales Audit Office staff will report to the Public Accounts Committee at the National Assembly for Wales. Their main findings and recommendations feature in Appendix 6 of this report.

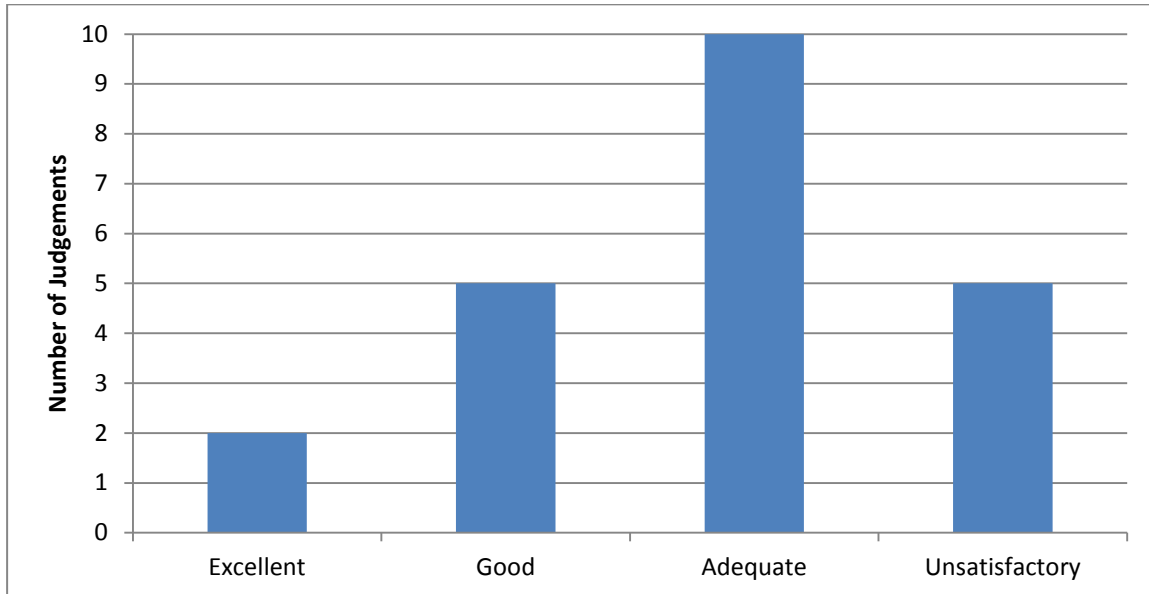
Estyn and Wales Audit Office staff carried out fieldwork visits to each regional consortium in partnership and evidence was shared between the two organisations.

The fieldwork visits involved interviews with key staff from each consortium and its related local authorities. These visits took place between November 2014 and January 2015. The survey also involved scrutiny of a wide range of evidence from schools, local authorities, diocesan authorities, regional consortia and the Welsh Government.

Background

Between September 2010 and November 2013, Estyn inspected all local authority services for children and young people. In each inspection, Estyn judged the authority's provision for school improvement. Figure 1 shows the distribution of judgements for school improvement for the 22 authorities.

Figure 1: Judgements for the provision of school improvement in local authorities, September 2010 – November 2013



Following their inspections, the majority of local authorities required follow-up activity, very often due to weaknesses in school performance, in school improvement services and in leadership and management.

During this cycle of inspections, and continuing after the cycle of core inspections had been completed, the Welsh Government introduced a range of policy developments aimed at improving the outcomes for children and young people in Wales.

In February 2011 the Minister for Education and Skills set out 20 priorities for rapidly transforming standards of achievement in Wales in his speech 'Teaching makes a difference'. One of the priorities the Minister identified was about the structural management and leadership of education in Wales. He included the following direction to local authorities:

We will expect local authorities to participate in consortia arrangements, including shared consortium services, or suffer financial penalties, including the withdrawal of Better Schools Funding. The consortia will identify system leaders, who will support and challenge the professional learning communities, which will have a focus on literacy and numeracy (p.14).

As a consequence, local authorities had to formalise their various existing informal arrangements for working together into the four regional consortia that exist now.

Two local authorities changed the consortium that they were part of during this formalisation. Cardiff joined the central south region having previously been part of south east Wales and Caerphilly moved in the opposite direction.

In October 2012, the Welsh Government published an information document 'Improving Schools'. This document sets out plans for improving the education system in Wales incorporating commitments made within the 'Teaching makes a difference' speech. Within these plans, the government outlined the important role that system leaders, working within regional consortia, had in challenging and supporting schools.

In June 2013, the Welsh Government published 'The future delivery of education services in Wales', following a review led by Robert Hill. Chapter 6 of this document considered the issue of the respective roles and responsibilities of the local authorities, regional consortia and national government. Hill (2013) described this as 'the area where there is the greatest urgency for decisions and action on the options for reform that I have identified' (p.3). Hill described the arrangements for school improvement in Wales at the time as 'profoundly unsatisfactory' (p.14).

Hill offered a range of options for delivering school improvement services through regional consortia. The Welsh Government consulted on Hill's review and options from June to September 2013 (Welsh Government, 2013a).

Separately from its work on education policy, the Welsh Government set up a Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery, led by Sir Paul Williams, in April 2013 to 'look hard, honestly and objectively at the way public services are governed and delivered in Wales, and how they may be improved' (Welsh Government, 2013b). The commission's report was published in January 2014 and recommended a reduction in the number of local authorities in Wales from the present 22 to between 10 and 12. In implementing any reduction, the commission recommended that the Welsh Government 'aligns the boundaries of the four school improvement consortia with those of the new local authorities' (p.111).

In February 2014, the Welsh Government published its 'National Model for Regional Working'. This national model outlines the vision of regional school improvement consortia as well as the respective roles of each tier (schools, local authorities, regional consortia and the Welsh Government) within the education system (Welsh Government, 2014a). The national model introduced the role of challenge advisers, who superseded the role of system leaders.

The national model covers the following elements in five key sections:

- 1 the mission, values and principles of effective school improvement
- 2 the scope of regional consortia
- 3 delivery of respective regional consortia and local authority functions
- 4 governance and accountability
- 5 the organisation and operation of consortia

The national model referred to an executive board as part of the governance arrangements. An unpublished addendum revised this to be an advisory board to clarify that it has no executive function following discussion between the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association.

The national model does not alter the statutory responsibilities that local authorities have for education.

Local authorities were expected to ensure that the arrangements for their regional consortia aligned to the national model from April 2014, although the guidance allowed for some school improvement services to be planned for regional delivery from April 2015.

In December 2012, the Welsh Government commissioned the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to report on 'Improving Schools in Wales'. The report was published in April 2014, and concluded that the 'school improvement infrastructure is undeveloped and lacks a clear implementation strategy for the long run' (p.36).

In June 2014, the Welsh Government published information about Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC). It described Schools Challenge Cymru as:

an acceleration and concentration of the Welsh Government's school improvement efforts, focused on secondary schools in Wales that face the largest challenge in terms of circumstance and stage of development (Welsh Government, 2014b, p.4).

The number of schools selected to be part of Schools Challenge Cymru within each regional consortia is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Number of schools selected to be part of Schools Challenge Cymru, by regional consortia

CSC	EAS	ERW	GwE
16	15	4	5

Source: Welsh Government (2014b)

In October 2014, the Welsh Government published 'Qualified for Life', its education improvement plan for three to 19-year-olds in Wales. This plan reiterated the role of regional consortia as follows:

The role of regional consortia in the National Model is to deliver intervention, and challenge. This challenge is essential to ensure that schools set ambitious and stretching targets for improved learner attainment. Their role is also to broker support strategies that improve teaching and learning, ensuring that partnership working and collaboration leads to higher standards and increased rigour (Welsh Government, 2014c, p.22).

In January 2015, the Welsh Government published the 'National School Categorisation System guidance for schools, local authorities and regional consortia', (Welsh Government, 2015a).

This guidance explains in detail the three steps of the National School Categorisation System:

- performance and standards
- self-evaluation and capacity to self-improve in relation to leadership and teaching

and learning

- categorisation and level of support, challenge and intervention

The Welsh Government had been developing this guidance with regional consortia prior to its publication and most of the detail was available to challenge advisers when categorising schools in the autumn term 2014.

Appendices 1-3 provide information about the regional consortia and their arrangements as they were at the end of January 2015.

Main findings

- 1 Although the general improvements in standards of pupil attainment over the past three years cannot be solely attributed to the development of regional consortia, the published data reflects a gradual improvement in pupil attainment across all four regions. At key stage 2 pupils attain at similar levels across all regions but at key stage 4 there is greater variation in levels of pupil outcomes. Performance is consistently higher in GWE and ERW than in CSC and EAS, the latter two regions having comparatively greater levels of social deprivation.
- 2 School inspection outcomes are broadly similar across the four regions, although there has been a notably higher proportion of schools causing concern in EAS in recent years.
- 3 The regional consortia have been slow to fully implement governance arrangements in line with the Welsh Government's National Model for Regional Working. All the regional consortia struggled to fill senior posts, which adversely affected their capacity to direct and manage work and highlights the lack of a national strategic approach to develop senior leaders. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the governance arrangements and senior leadership and management of the consortia.
- 4 All the consortia prepared business plans for 2014-2015 that focus appropriately on the most important areas for improvement. However, all the plans have important weaknesses in them. In particular, the plans do not identify well enough what impact is expected from actions taken and how and when this will be measured. This is particularly the case for the sections that set out how the consortia tailor their work to meet the needs of individual local authorities. None of the consortia has a medium-term plan in place to guide a strategic approach to school improvement.
- 5 While there are examples of robust scrutiny by elected members of how a regional consortium is working with individual schools at a local authority level, scrutiny committees do not hold their senior officers and representatives to account well enough for their role in ensuring that the consortium meets the needs of the authority's schools. In addition there is no joint approach to scrutinising the effectiveness of the consortium as a whole in any region.
- 6 The self-evaluation reports produced by the regional consortia are in the main overly positive. These reports identify strengths more accurately and convincingly than shortcomings.
- 7 Most of the regional consortia have engaged effectively with local authority officers, school leaders and trade unions in developing their regional priorities and policies for school improvement. However, none of the consortia has engaged enough with diocesan authorities.
- 8 The regional consortia have strengthened their quality assurance arrangements for challenge advisers, particularly since September 2014, and there is greater consistency in the work of challenge advisers as a result. However, the arrangements are not always implemented rigorously enough and pre-inspection reports for schools still do not always match the outcome of inspections closely enough.

- 9 The EAS and CSC have more than twice as many schools involved in the Schools Challenge Cymru programme as the other two regions. In these regions, the consortia are unclear about their working relationship with the schools in the programme. The consortia are also unclear about how they will evaluate their specific role in improvements in these schools and the implications this has for any wider evaluation of school improvement across Wales.
- 10 None of the regional consortia has a coherent strategic approach to reduce the impact of deprivation on attainment. The regional consortia have not monitored closely enough how well schools are using the Pupil Deprivation Grant.
- 11 All the consortia have suitable arrangements in place with local authorities for sharing useful information from many service areas relevant to their work, such as additional learning needs, social inclusion and wellbeing, finance and complaints. However, none of the consortia has a fully developed and consistently used system to collate, analyse and share information about the progress of pupils and schools.
- 12 Regional consortia generally know how well many of their schools are currently performing through the work of challenge advisers, supported by their analysis of attainment data. Most headteachers and chairs of governing bodies report that the performance of their school is scrutinised closely and fairly by challenge advisers.
- 13 Although challenge advisers generally know what assessment data indicates about a school's performance, this does not always mean that they know the school well enough. Challenge advisers are not always diagnostic enough in understanding why a school is performing well or not. Challenge advisers are not always involved enough in moderating teacher assessment and they are less effective at evaluating teaching and leadership than standards. However, weaknesses in challenge adviser work are not as prevalent as they were when consortia began to formalise in 2012.
- 14 Overall, regional consortia are better at challenging schools about their current performance than supporting them to improve. All the consortia have an appropriately strong focus on supporting improvement in literacy and numeracy. However, support for schools in many other areas of learning, such as non-core subjects, is either weak, inconsistent or unavailable. In the EAS and CSC, there is not enough support for Welsh-medium schools. The consortia are developing strategies to facilitate schools to support each other, although only CSC involves all schools in their strategy. The consortia do not monitor and evaluate well enough the impact of their support to improve schools, whether this support is provided directly or brokered or is school-to-school support that they facilitate.
- 15 Regional consortia usually provide appropriate and timely information to local authorities about schools causing concern. Although local authorities are using their statutory powers of intervention more readily, a minority are still reluctant to intervene even when their regional consortium provides a clear mandate for action. Once a local authority issues a statutory warning notice to improve to a school, the regional consortium usually works well with both the school and the local authority to agree a suitable plan and monitor progress.
- 16 Estyn and the Wales Audit Office staff provided verbal feedback to the regional consortia following visits to gather evidence for this survey. The consortia have responded positively to their feedback and have already begun to address many of the issues raised in this report.

Recommendations

Regional consortia should:

R1 Improve performance management arrangements by:

- planning for the medium term to ensure a strategic approach to school improvement
- ensuring that plans contain actions that are specific and measurable, with appropriate targets, costings and milestones for delivery
- capturing, sharing and using data (from pupil level up) efficiently and effectively
- monitoring the progress of pupils and schools regularly
- taking a more robust approach to identifying and managing risks
- realistically self-evaluating their strengths and shortcomings
- tightly managing the individual performance of their staff

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

R3 Develop clearer strategies to address the impact of deprivation upon education outcomes and ensure that all actions are coherent in this purpose

R4 Improve the quality and range of support for schools and in particular:

- develop clearer strategies for maximising the potential of school-to-school support
- provide or broker better support for teaching and learning in non-core subject areas

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

Local authorities should:

R6 Support their regional consortium to develop medium-term business plans and ensure that all plans take account of the needs of their local schools

R7 Develop formal working arrangements between scrutiny committees in their consortium in order to scrutinise the work and impact of their regional consortium

The Welsh Government should:

R8 Improve its strategy to develop senior leaders and managers for education at local authority and regional consortia level

R9 Work more collaboratively with consortia and local authorities to agree short and medium-term business plans and reduce requests to change and add to plans mid-year

- R10 Ensure that school categorisation is rigorously moderated across the consortia
- R11 Develop an agreed understanding between teachers, schools, local authorities, regional consortia and Welsh Government about the purpose and use of attainment targets
- R12 Engage more effectively with diocesan authorities in developing its strategy for school improvement
- R13 Ensure that consortia, local authorities and diocesan authorities are clear about their respective roles and responsibilities for schools in the Schools Challenge Cymru programme

Leadership and management

Leadership and management

- 17 The regional consortia have been slow to develop governance arrangements in line with the Welsh Government's National Model for Regional Working. None of the consortia had fully implemented appropriate arrangements from April 2014, and only CSC had fully implemented appropriate arrangements by the time of the survey visits.
- 18 Recent changes to management and leadership structures reflect the need that all the regional consortia recognised for improved capacity within their senior leadership teams to direct and manage the work. All of the regional consortia recruited staff to senior posts in 2014, including, for example, the managing director posts in CSC and ERW. Recent recruitment to senior posts has been partly to fill vacant posts previously covered by interim arrangements following a failure to appoint and partly because the consortia wanted to strengthen their management capacity. It is not possible to evaluate the quality of internal leadership of the regional consortia because of the number of senior staff that had been in post for less than a year at the time of the survey visits.
- 19 As the regional consortia have developed, they have received an increasing number of requests from Welsh Government officials about how they should operate. Working within these requests, each consortium has attempted to develop its own identity and agree an approach that they believe will meet the needs of schools in their region. Whatever their approach to implementing the national model, all the regional consortia are careful not to undermine the statutory responsibilities that local authorities still have for their schools.
- 20 Considerable time has been invested by managing directors and other senior staff in the regional consortia and local authorities to build headteachers' confidence in the new arrangements. Headteachers were generally sceptical about the value of regional consortia initially but are increasingly working well with them to ensure that their services meet the needs of their school.
- 21 All of the regional consortia managing directors are clear about the vision for their service and this is understood by most staff working in their consortium. However, in ERW and GwE this vision is not shared wholeheartedly by all senior local authority officers, including chief executives and chief education officers, who hold different opinions about the role that their consortium should have and how it should develop in future. For example, the six local authority directors in north Wales commissioned a report into how they could best provide additional functions set out in the Welsh Government's National Model for Regional Working, such as support for Foundation Phase and 14-19 learning. However, GwE's senior staff expected to take on these additional functions from April 2015.
- 22 In a few instances, the Welsh Government has asked regional consortia to take on additional work at short notice. Recent examples include preparatory work with

schools for PISA¹ and changes to GCSE qualifications and responsibility for the element of the Pupil Deprivation Grant targeted for improving the educational outcomes of looked after children. Responding to short-notice requests has put a strain on the resources of the consortia and does not help them to plan effectively.

- 23 Not all local authority directors of education are equally engaged in the leadership of their consortium. In each region, one director acts as a lead director for the work of that consortium. The lead directors provide good support and guidance to the managing directors of the regional consortia.

Business planning

- 24 All of the consortia have lacked sufficient capacity to manage the business needs of their work, including, for example, support for administration, finance, information management and communication. This has been exacerbated by the Welsh Government making requests on consortia during the year which are additional to those agreed in original business plans. The complexity of funding arrangements and therefore lines of accountability have increased since the introduction of consortia as an extra middle tier in the delivery of education services in Wales. This is illustrated in appendix 4, which shows the funding flow in 1999 following Welsh devolution and the funding flows in 2015.
- 25 The lack of capacity to meet the business needs of their work has caused a range of difficulties for staff at all levels and had a negative impact on schools' perception of the consortia. All of the consortia were still recruiting to key posts during the current academic year.
- 26 All the regional consortia prepared suitable business plans for 2014-2015 that were approved by Welsh Government. While these plans focus on the most important areas for improvement, actions are not always specific enough, occasionally lack timescales and costings, and are not always assigned to an appropriate lead person. In particular, all the plans have weaknesses in identifying what impact actions are expected to have and how and when this will be measured.
- 27 Regional consortia business plans have appendices that show how the consortium will tailor its work to support each local authority's specific priorities. However, the weaknesses outlined in the previous paragraph on business plans are more prevalent within these appendices than in the core plan.
- 28 Systems to monitor and report on performance against business plans are not robust enough in most regions.
- 29 None of the regions has a suitable medium-term plan in place to guide a strategic approach to school improvement.
- 30 None of the regional consortia has done enough to identify or manage risks. During interviews for this survey, senior managers in regional consortia and local authorities, and elected members, all referred to significant risks within their region. However, these were often not taken into account in formal processes to identify and manage risks.

¹ See glossary for definition

Decision-making and scrutiny

- 31 The joint committees (and company board in the case of EAS) are still developing their arrangements to ensure their effectiveness. Agendas and minutes of their meetings are not accessible to the public in all regions. Records of meetings do not always record decisions clearly enough or indicate the status of different members when voting on decisions.
- 32 Senior management and wider staff meetings are not minuted in every regional consortia. This makes it harder to follow up on decisions that are taken, including actions that are agreed. It also makes it difficult for absent staff keep up-to-date and increases the risk of inconsistency in the way staff work.
- 33 Currently, consortia staff spend too much time responding to individual scrutiny committees. Managing directors and other senior consortium staff attend local authority scrutiny meetings to discuss the impact they are having on schools and are increasingly challenged robustly about the performance of individual schools. Scrutiny committees do not hold the local authority's senior officers to account well enough for their role in ensuring that the regional service is meeting the needs of schools in their authority. Scrutiny committees are not working well together across each region to co-ordinate their work even though they share a common interest in the overall effectiveness of their regional service. As a result, consortia themselves do not have a collective view of the progress and impact of regional working.

Self-evaluation

- 34 All regional consortia have engaged constructively with most relevant stakeholders to inform their self-evaluation and planning processes. However, the effectiveness of this engagement and its strategic influence varies widely between the regions. CSC has been particularly successful in bringing stakeholders together over the last year and taking their views into account in strategic planning, for example in their development of school improvement groups.
- 35 All regional consortia provided a self-evaluation report in preparation for the fieldwork visits for this survey. Overall these reports tend to be too positive and identify strengths more accurately than shortcomings. Shortcomings tend to be written ambiguously or phrased as an area for development or an area that is improving, and it is often unclear how significant the issues are. This report highlights shortcomings that were not identified clearly enough by consortia themselves.

Communication and engagement with stakeholders

- 36 Most of the regional consortia have engaged effectively with local authority officers, school leaders and trade unions in changing the employer or employment status of the majority of local authority staff. The consortia successfully managed the process of contract changes, involving relevant stakeholders.
- 37 ERW and GwE have struggled to establish effective lines of communication with schools in order that they have a consistent understanding of key messages and can easily access information about their consortium.

- 38 None of the regional consortia has engaged effectively with diocesan authorities to ensure a clear agreement about joint working relationships. Only one regional consortium, GwE, has formally involved diocesan authorities in its governance arrangements. Consequently, the diocesan authorities are not involved consistently in discussions and decisions about their schools. For example, regional consortia do not work closely enough with diocesan authorities during the school categorisation process or in the preparation of reports on schools for Estyn.

Attainment targets

- 39 There is a lack of agreed understanding between teachers, schools, local authorities, regional consortia and the Welsh Government about the purpose and use of attainment targets. This lack of understanding also extends to pupils and parents. Once set, targets for individual pupils should aggregate to a school's overall targets. These school targets should aggregate to targets for the local authority and ultimately the regional consortia. However, this not always the case. Targets sometimes appear to be unrealistically aspirational and yet others, even within the same consortium, appear to set little challenge at all. It is not clear how targets are used, what the expectations are for schools and what the implications are if targets are not met.

The role of challenge advisers

- 40 The role of challenge advisers has evolved since September 2012, when they were originally known as system leaders. In September 2012, most of the staff in each regional consortium had formerly worked for the school improvement service in one of the constituent local authorities. Many of these staff had worked as advisers to schools for particular subjects areas or phases of learning, or had worked as link advisers to schools. However, the increased demands of the challenge adviser role has meant that all of the consortia have made significant changes in the personnel who carry out this work. In particular, there has been an increase in the proportion of challenge adviser work being undertaken by headteachers seconded from their school for part or all of their time. Usually these are headteachers from schools where leadership is judged to be at least good and often excellent. While headteachers generally prefer a challenge adviser who has been a headteacher themselves, none of the consortia has attempted to evaluate whether or not the role is more effectively carried out by seconded headteachers rather than by challenge advisers who have a different career profile.
- 41 The changing nature of the role has been supported by guidance from the Welsh Government, which the regional consortia helped to develop, (Welsh Government, 2014a). The Welsh Government provided training for all challenge advisers in Wales in September 2014. It expects all challenge advisers to successfully complete training in inspection skills with Estyn, if they have not already done so, and subsequently to join an Estyn inspection as a team inspector at least once per year. Of those who required training in 2014-2015, most challenge advisers completed it successfully.
- 42 In addition to the training provided by the Welsh Government, the regional consortia provide new challenge advisers with useful training and guidance. In the most

effective cases, new challenge advisers have a mentor and are accompanied by an experienced challenge adviser on one of their first school visits. Although this early support is very helpful, it is implemented inconsistently. For example, in one region, a headteacher who was seconded as a part-time challenge adviser from September 2014 worked for the whole autumn term without an experienced challenge adviser accompanying them on a visit.

Quality assurance

- 43 The regional consortia have strengthened their arrangements to quality assure the work of staff at all levels. This has been achieved particularly through new appointments to senior positions and through an increase in capacity to manage the workload. There is also a clearer understanding of what is expected from challenge advisers and this is supported by better internal guidance on how they should work. This has improved the consistency of challenge adviser work. However, in no region are the quality assurance arrangements implemented rigorously enough. For example, in the current year Estyn has received pre-inspection reports on schools that contain contradictory judgements within them and reports that plagiarise content from previous reports for different schools. Pre-inspection reports for schools have not always matched the outcome of inspections closely enough.
- 44 Individual performance management arrangements are in place for three of the four regional consortia managing directors, the exception being GwE. Challenge advisers and other staff who work directly with schools all have appropriate arrangements in place for individual performance management, although these have not been operating for long enough to evaluate their effectiveness.

Schools causing concern

- 45 Approaches to those schools causing greatest concern vary across the regions. In three consortia, schools that are categorised as red, since they are in need of the greatest improvement, attract the most resources. In contrast, ERW's strategy is normally to give more resources to schools with an amber categorisation rather than red. ERW's rationale for this is that red schools usually require a significant change in the quality and capacity of leadership and that, until this occurs, resources will have limited impact. However, it is too early to judge whether or not ERW is deploying its resources more effectively as a result of this strategy.

Schools Challenge Cymru

- 46 Two regional consortia, ERW and GwE, have significantly fewer secondary schools involved in the Welsh Government's Schools Challenge Cymru programme compared to the other two consortia. ERW and GwE have managed successfully to align the Schools Challenge Cymru approach to school improvement with their own regional approach. However, EAS and CSC have more than twice as many schools involved in the programme as the other two regions and have struggled to align this work well with their own work. These regional consortia are not clear about their working relationship with these schools while they are in the programme and do not receive regular up-to-date information from the Schools Challenge Cymru advisers about what is happening in these schools. EAS and CSC both have a local authority in their region that has 75% of its secondary schools in the programme. It is unclear how consortia will evaluate their role in schools that are part of the programme, and this has significant implications for the wider evaluation of their work.

Tackling deprivation

- 47 The Welsh Government places a high priority on tackling the link between deprivation and education outcomes. In various reports in recent years, Estyn has highlighted issues and good practice in this aspect of schools' work. Although the regional consortia promote good practice in this area from a range of national sources, they do not do enough to share the learning from individual schools that are particularly successful within their region. None of the regional consortia has a coherent strategic approach to reduce the impact of deprivation on attainment. The regional consortia have not monitored closely enough how well schools are using the Pupil Deprivation Grant.
- 48 Senior managers in ERW region refer to challenges in improving schools in their regions due to rural poverty. This region covers a large geographical area and has a high proportion of small, rural schools, particularly compared to the other two southern regions in Wales. Generally only a low percentage of pupils in these schools are eligible for free school meals and so these schools do not receive much additional funding through the pupil deprivation grant, for example. However, ERW managers have not defined these challenges well enough and the consortium has not planned strategically to address issues associated with rural poverty.

Sharing information

- 49 None of the consortia has a fully developed system to collate, analyse and share information about the progress of pupils and schools. Schools and education services in local authorities and consortia are not always able to share information with each other as easily and quickly as they would like due to limitations in the accessibility or compatibility of IT systems.
- 50 All of the regional consortia have suitable arrangements in place with local authorities for sharing useful information from many service areas relevant to their work, such as additional learning needs, social inclusion and wellbeing, finance and complaints. Managers from the regional consortia and local authorities meet regularly to discuss and resolve issues in these areas relating to individual schools and this joint working is generally effective in all regions. However, decision and actions from these meetings are not always recorded well enough to hold people to account when monitoring the progress of schools.
- 51 Estyn's report on attendance in secondary schools, published in September 2014, highlighted weaknesses in the arrangements between regional consortia and local authorities in this important area:

The role of education welfare services is not always clear in relation to regional consortia arrangements and there is sometimes a lack of co-ordination between school improvement services in consortia and the residual attendance and inclusion services in local authorities. School improvement services do not make full use of the knowledge of schools and families held by education welfare officers, (Estyn, 2014a, p.4).

Response to initial feedback from Estyn and the Wales Audit Office

- 52 Estyn and the Wales Audit Office provided verbal feedback to the regional consortia following visits to gather evidence for this survey. All the consortia have responded constructively to their feedback and have already begun to address many of the issues raised in this report.

School improvement services

Challenging schools

- 53 Regional consortia know how well many of their schools are currently performing through the work of challenge advisers, supported by their analysis of data. Most headteachers and chairs of governing bodies report that their school performance is scrutinised closely and fairly by challenge advisers. A few schools have had too many different challenge advisers since September 2012, resulting in an unclear view of the school from their regional consortium.
- 54 Although challenge advisers know how well many of their schools are currently performing as a result of data analysis, they are not always diagnostic enough in understanding why a school is or is not performing well or in validating the quality of evidence the school provides for its current performance. This is particularly the case for primary schools that have historically been viewed as good or excellent schools.
- 55 Challenge advisers are not always clear about where the best practice is in a school that is suitable for promoting amongst other schools. This may be because challenge advisers spend a very limited amount of time in schools that are performing well and often accept the school's view of best practice without verifying it.
- 56 Until the current year, each regional consortium had its own system for judging schools. These systems were not implemented consistently and judgements about too many schools were inaccurate or not comprehensive enough. In particular, judgements about school leadership and management were not helpful. They tended to present an overly positive view of the school since they were not explicit or diagnostic enough about shortcomings in the quality of leadership.
- 57 From September 2014, regional consortia have used a common system, set by Welsh Government, to categorise schools, (Welsh Government, 2015a). Within this system, the judgement about a school's current performance is pre-determined by a formula based on key performance indicators. Regional consortia are then required to judge each school's capacity to improve. The regional consortia consider both judgements for current performance and capacity to improve to determine an overall categorisation for the school using a four-tier colour-coded scale. Using this new system, many schools are categorised in line with Welsh Government guidelines. All regional consortia moderated their judgements internally before meeting Welsh Government officials to confirm the categorisation. The categorisation was published in January 2015, so it is too early to compare with school inspection findings in order to evaluate how accurate and helpful the categorisation process has been.

- 58 Most challenge advisers use key performance data well in challenging schools. In some consortia, challenge advisers are also provided with an internal analysis of the data for the schools they work with. This is good practice as it supports a consistent approach to interpreting data. It also saves challenge advisers' time, allowing them to spend more time working directly with schools.
- 59 Challenge advisers usually take good account of the progress of individual pupils when evaluating a school. However, up-to-date information about pupils' progress during the school year is not easily accessible from the local authorities for all challenge advisers and they are sometimes reliant on being given information directly from schools. This lack of central access to pupil data limits how well challenge advisers are able to prepare for meetings with headteachers and evaluate the progress of schools prior to the publication of key performance data.
- 60 Challenge advisers are improving the quality of their work in corroborating a school's own view of the quality of teaching. Where this works well, challenge advisers observe lessons jointly with school staff in order to form a common understanding about how teaching is evaluated. This helps to standardise judgements and to build confidence and capacity in the school's internal quality assurance processes. Such work is often supported usefully by joint scrutiny of pupils' work to consider the impact that teaching has on pupils' progress over time. However, challenge advisers occasionally still do not offer clear judgements about the quality of teaching in their reports on schools.
- 61 Across Wales, challenge advisers have not been involved enough in assuring the quality of teacher assessment and the moderation of this between schools. In too many schools, weaknesses in teacher assessment have not been challenged appropriately. This affects the accuracy of the school's categorisation and means that important areas for improvement in the school may not be picked up until the school is inspected by Estyn.
- 62 The quality and accuracy of judgements about leadership and management in schools are improving, although from a relatively weak base. The capability of challenge advisers to make sound judgements has improved. Guidance from the Welsh Government to accompany its national approach to categorising schools has also helped to standardise how challenge advisers evaluate leadership and management across the regions, (Welsh Government, 2015a). However, reports on schools provided to Estyn in advance of an inspection or monitoring visit are still not consistently accurate or useful enough in any of the regions. In particular, there is a tendency to place too much emphasis on plans for improvement or recent actions to support improvement rather than robust evidence that outcomes are improving.
- 63 Written reports that challenge advisers prepare vary too much in quality. In particular, pre-inspection reports from local authorities are usually drafted by challenge advisers and too often these reports do not reflect closely enough the findings of inspection teams. The reports are not helpful to inspection teams where they do not specify shortcomings clearly enough or justify sufficiently work that is deemed to be sector-leading practice.
- 64 Most challenge advisers work well with headteachers to identify and agree the school's main areas for improvement. School improvement plans generally cover

these agreed areas. However actions to deliver improvements are not always specific enough and do not always identify the role of the regional consortium, if any, clearly enough. This makes it difficult for the consortium to plan its work across all schools effectively. Challenge advisers do not challenge schools enough about what impact the school expects its actions to have and how the school will monitor and evaluate this impact.

Supporting schools

- 65 Almost all headteachers are clear about the level of support they can expect from their regional consortia as a result of their current categorisation. This was not the case when consortia first used their own forms of categorisation.
- 66 Overall, regional consortia are better at challenging schools about their current performance than supporting them to improve. The development of all four regional consortia over the last two years has involved significant change in personnel and staffing structures associated with challenge advisers and their managers. This is partly due to the Welsh Government's approach, particularly through the National Model for Regional Working (2014a), the introduction of the national school categorisation system (2015a) and 'review and challenge' meetings held termly with regional consortia.
- 67 The four regional consortia have different approaches to supporting schools on their agreed areas for improvement. This support may be provided directly by the regional consortia if the service has the necessary expertise and capacity to meet the need such as through the provision of training courses or more bespoke support. The capacity of staff working for the regional consortia to directly provide support to schools varies considerably across Wales. Where there is less internal capacity, the regional consortia make more use of school-to-school approaches and external consultants. The consortia have not measured the relative impact of using different approaches. EAS has recently developed a management information system that aims to support more sophisticated evaluations but it is too early to judge its effectiveness.
- 68 The amount of school-to-school support is increasing and consortia are doing more to facilitate this. The regional consortia are taking different approaches to school-to-school support and overall the vision and strategy for facilitating school-to-school support are generally unclear. In one consortium, CSC, all schools have been placed into small school improvement groups that include primary and secondary schools with a wider brief to consider how they can support each other. In another consortium, EAS, secondary schools have been brought together in small groups. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the group approaches in these two regions. In the other two consortia, school-to-school support is largely contained within local authority or hub² boundaries rather than across the whole region. While there is evidence that some of these local strategies are effective, these consortia are not making best use of the range of good practice across the region.

² Hubs involve two local authorities within a consortium.

- 69 The increasing use of secondments and school-to-school support activity within consortia could result in greater use of supply cover for teachers. This is an important area of concern raised in previous reports from Estyn (2013) and the Auditor General for Wales (2013) about the impact of supply cover on pupils' outcomes. None of the regional consortia has assessed the impact that their strategies for school improvement have on the amount of supply cover used by schools and the consequent risk this poses to the quality of teaching and learning.
- 70 All of the regional consortia use external consultants to support schools with specific needs. External consultants are an expensive resource and consortia do not show clearly that these consultants provide suitable value-for-money. Some external consultants employed by the consortia have a conflict of interest where they are gaining additional work to support schools within that region for themselves or a company they work for as a result of their contracted work with the consortia. While they, or their company, may be well-placed to carry out the additional work, there are not enough checks in the system to ensure that this is in the best interests of the schools concerned rather than the interests of the consultants and their company.
- 71 All the consortia are using grant funding to develop training programmes to support schools with key aspects of curriculum development, pedagogy, qualification changes, PISA preparation and leadership. Generally, the regional consortia are taking an evidence-based approach to training. They are getting better at evaluating the effectiveness of training on the basis of the impact it ultimately has on pupils' outcomes rather than the perceived quality of its delivery.
- 72 All of the regional consortia are struggling to balance delivery of the National Support Programme (NSP) for the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) with their own strategies for improving literacy and numeracy in schools. This is resulting in duplication of work, resources not being targeted well enough or a lack of clarity about areas for improvement in the school and how these should be addressed most effectively.
- 73 Estyn reports published within the last year on literacy, numeracy, mathematics and ICT all highlight shortcomings in the quality of support from regional consortia, as shown in the extracts below:

Literacy in key stage 3: an interim report (January 2015)

The baseline study 'Literacy at key stage 3' recommended that local authorities should produce 'a well-developed literacy strategy and mechanisms to improve standards across the curriculum', (Estyn, 2012, p.4). This has not happened and the responsibility for doing so has become unclear since the introduction of consortia and the implementation of the NSP. In a majority of the surveyed schools, there has been little meaningful impact from the consortia or practical support from challenge advisers. As a result, schools have been slow in understanding and implementing what is required by the LNF, (Estyn, 2015a, p.17).

Numeracy in key stages 2 and 3: an interim report (November 2014)

The four regional consortia are at different stages of development. Regional consortia staff acknowledge that support for numeracy is less developed than that for literacy. The strategic approach, support systems and number of dedicated staff for numeracy vary considerably between the regional consortia. Areas for further development by the regional consortia are to:

- improve the numerical knowledge of non-specialist teachers
- improve teachers' abilities to develop numerical reasoning
- use lead practitioners and departments to develop good practice
- challenge, support and strengthen mathematics departments in secondary schools, particularly those where standards are weak
- ensure effective communication between National Support Programme partners and regional officers
- continue to move from local authority specific approaches to regional approaches, (Estyn, 2014b, p.18).

Good practice in mathematics at key stage 3 (February 2015)

In the schools visited, the overall support from the regional consortia to help teachers of mathematics to improve their practice varies too much. For example, only a few mathematics departments have received effective levels of support and challenge from experienced challenge advisers or subject specialist advisers, (Estyn, 2015b, p.19).

ICT at key stage 3 (July 2014)

Most schools are unsure about the level of ICT support arrangements that can be provided by the new regional consortia. Currently, middle leaders and teachers do not have enough access to appropriate professional development, external reviews and regular networking opportunities, (Estyn, 2014c, p.3).

- 74 In EAS and CSC, there is not enough support for Welsh-medium schools. However, both consortia have identified this shortcoming and are working constructively with schools to improve the availability and quality of support through the medium of Welsh.
- 75 The quality of support for the Foundation Phase varies too much across and within the regional consortia. Estyn's (2015c) recent report on the impact of advisory teachers on funded non-maintained settings noted weaknesses in leadership and management at regional and local authority level.
- 76 The regional consortia provide little support for schools with non-core subjects such as creative arts, physical education and sport, humanities, information technology, design and technology, modern foreign languages, child development and social care. Challenge advisers are less likely to know how well these subjects are taught or led within schools and therefore less well placed to help schools that are looking

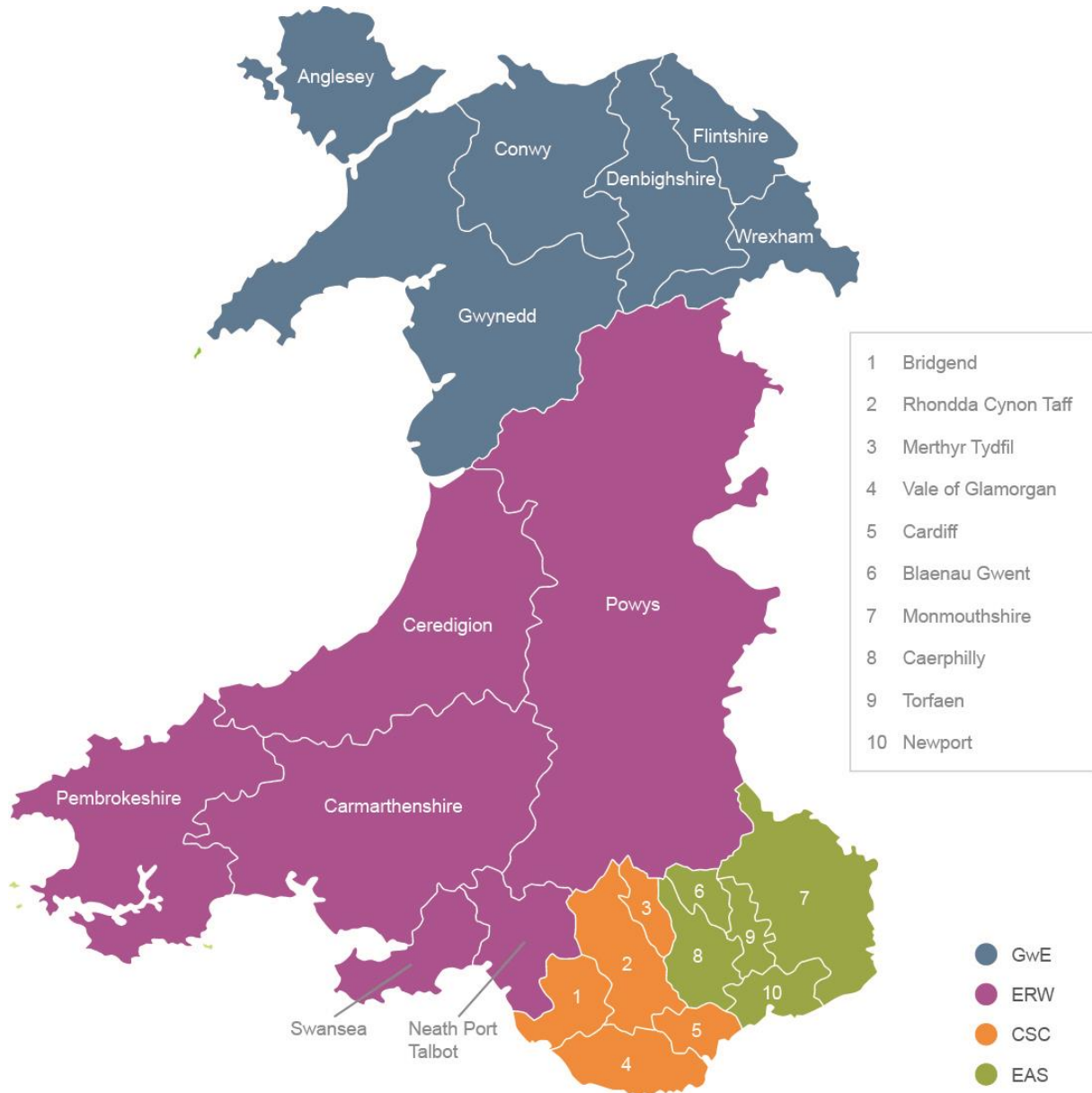
for support in these areas compared to core subjects. This is a significant shortcoming because pupils' learning experiences and results in qualifications in non-core subjects areas affect their disposition to learning and are often the basis for learning and career choices they make post-16.

- 77 Where planned or specifically requested, regional consortia, often through challenge advisers, provide good support to governors to improve their understanding of how to evaluate school performance, provision and the quality of leadership and management.

Intervening in schools

- 78 Regional consortia usually provide appropriate and timely information to local authorities about schools causing concern. Challenge advisers and their managers meet local authority senior officers regularly to discuss these schools and the potential for the local authority to use its statutory powers of intervention.
- 79 All local authorities use informal approaches to varying extents to challenge weak leadership in schools. Although local authorities are using their powers of intervention more readily, a minority are still reluctant to intervene even when their regional consortium provide a clear case for action.
- 80 Many local authorities issue letters to schools advising them of the authority's concern about the school's current performance or another important area requiring improvement. Sometimes these are formal warning notices, although more often they are informal warning letters. Where there is good practice, the local authority works well with their regional consortium to agree the specific areas requiring improvement and a clear process for monitoring progress. Occasionally letters are not followed up well by the local authority, although this is outside of the control of regional consortium.
- 81 Once a local authority issues a statutory warning notice to improve to a school, the regional consortium usually works well with both the school and the local authority to agree a suitable plan and monitor progress.
- 82 One regional consortium, EAS, has commissioned specialist human resources support for schools to advise governing bodies on addressing concerns about the capability of teachers and school leaders. This is jointly provided by two of the local authorities within the region. ERW has been particularly proactive in working with human resources teams within the six authorities to bring a greater consistency and rigour to tackling underperforming staff in schools. In the other two regions, the quality of specialist human resources support to schools is more variable. Irrespective of the specific arrangements, there has been inconsistency in the support and advice given to schools and challenge advisers within regions, which is unhelpful.

Appendix 1: Map of regional consortia



Appendix 2: Regional share of schools and pupils

Figure 3 shows the number of maintained schools (middle, nursery, primary, secondary and special) and statutory school age pupils (aged 5-15) within each regional consortia, along with the percentage these contribute to the total numbers in Wales.

Figure 3: Number and percentage of maintained schools and statutory school age pupils (aged 5-15) within each regional consortia, January 2014

Regional consortia	Number of maintained schools	Percentage of maintained schools in Wales	Number of statutory school age pupils (aged 5-15)	Percentage of statutory school age pupils (aged 5-15) in Wales
CSC	411	25.2%	110,422	30.4%
EAS	253	15.5%	70,405	19.4%
ERW	524	32.1%	101,910	28.1%
GwE	445	27.3%	79,924	22.0%

Source: Welsh Government (2014d)

Appendix 3: Regional consortia arrangements

This appendix sets out the regional consortia arrangements as they were at the end of January 2015. The arrangements differ in all four regions and these are described in the following paragraphs. Figure 4 on the following page is a visual representation of the different arrangements.

South East Wales

The authorities in the regional consortium for south east Wales are Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen. The Education Achievement Service (EAS)³ is a company limited by guarantee set up by the local authorities to provide school improvement services on their behalf. EAS has five principal challenge advisers who oversee the work in one local authority each.

Central South Wales

The authorities in the regional consortium for central south Wales are Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Vale of Glamorgan. The regional consortium is a joint committee and is called Central South Consortium Joint Education Service (CSC)⁴. Rhondda Cynon Taf is the employer for all CSC staff.

South West and Mid Wales

The authorities in the regional consortium for south west and mid Wales are Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire, Powys and Swansea. The regional consortium is a joint committee and is called Education through Regional Working (ERW)⁵.

ERW has a small central team. This team mainly comprises the managing director and business support staff. Pembrokeshire local authority is the employer of this central team. ERW organises its work through three hubs of two local authorities each. Each of these hubs has a lead manager, employed by one of the two authorities. Within each hub, each local authority has a team of challenge advisers, employed by the authority. The hub lead and challenge advisers are employed by different local authorities but all work under the ERW brand, hence the shaded boxes in the chart between ERW's small central team and the local authorities.

North Wales

The authorities in the regional consortium for north Wales are Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd and Wrexham. The regional consortium is a joint

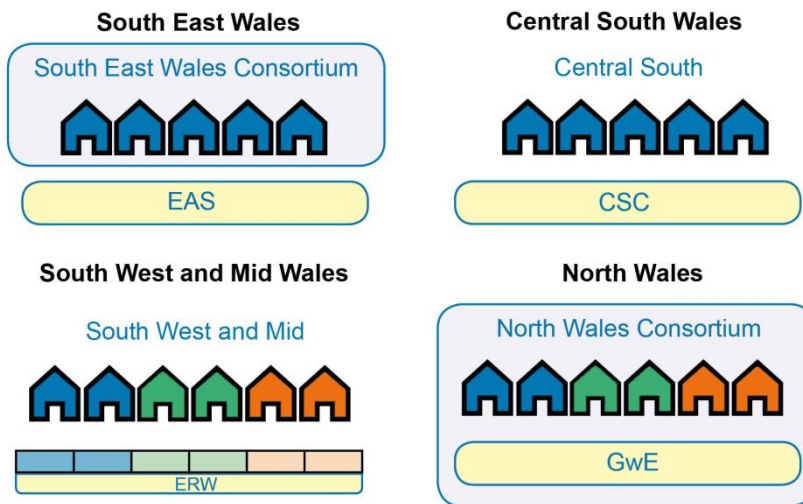
³ <http://www.sewales.org.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.cscjes.org.uk>

⁵ <http://www.erw.org.uk/>

committee and is called GwE⁶. The North Wales Consortium still oversees aspects of education (such as support for Foundation Phase) in the region outside of the scope of GwE. GwE's work is delivered through three hubs that cover two local authorities each. Each hub has a lead manager within GwE. Gwynedd is the employer for all GwE staff.

Figure 4: Regional consortia arrangements



⁶ The name GwE comes from the Welsh 'Gwasanaeth Effeithiolrwydd', which means 'effectiveness service'. <http://www.gwe.org.uk/>

Appendix 4: Funding flows

Figure 5: Funding flows (2015)

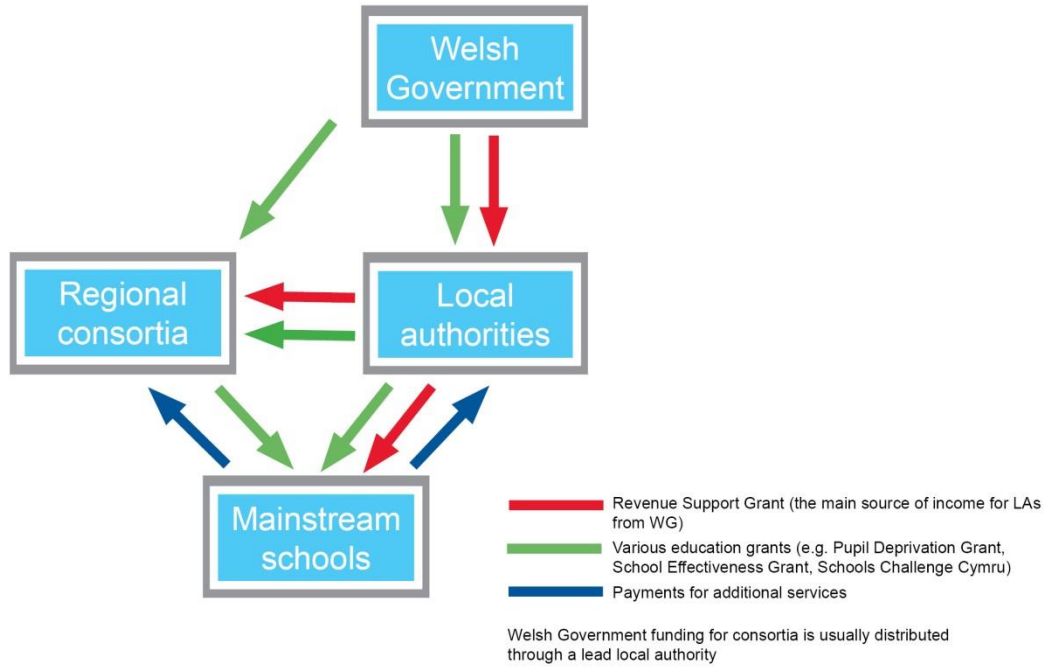
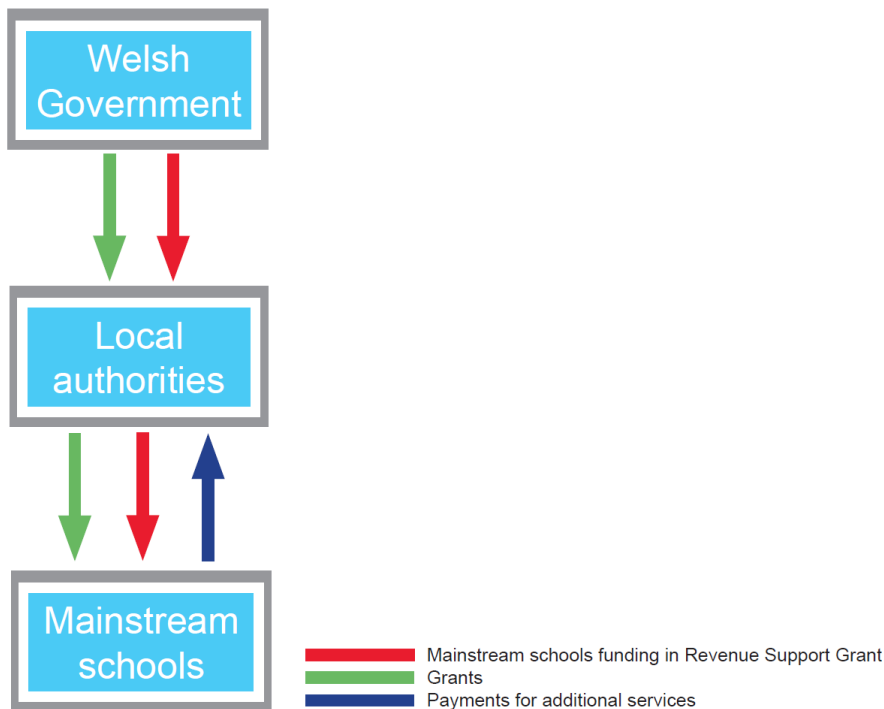


Figure 6: Funding flows (1999)



Appendix 5: Regional view of school performance

Over the last three years, all of the consortia have been through significant changes in their governance, structure and staffing arrangements as well as in policy and strategy. It is too early to attribute recent trends in performance to the work of consortia. However, the current performance of schools within each regional consortium is an important context for their work.

The proportion of statutory school age pupils (aged 5-15) in maintained schools eligible for free school meals varies across the four regions, as shown in Figure 7. Estyn uses this indicator as a measure of deprivation levels and it is an important context when making comparative judgements about performance in the regions.

Figure 7: Percentage of statutory school age pupils (aged 5-15) in maintained schools eligible for free school meals, by regional consortia and Wales overall, January 2014

Regional consortia	Percentage of statutory school age pupils in maintained schools eligible for free school meals, January 2014
CSC	21.4%
EAS	21.1%
ERW	17.5%
GwE	16.5%
Wales	19.2%

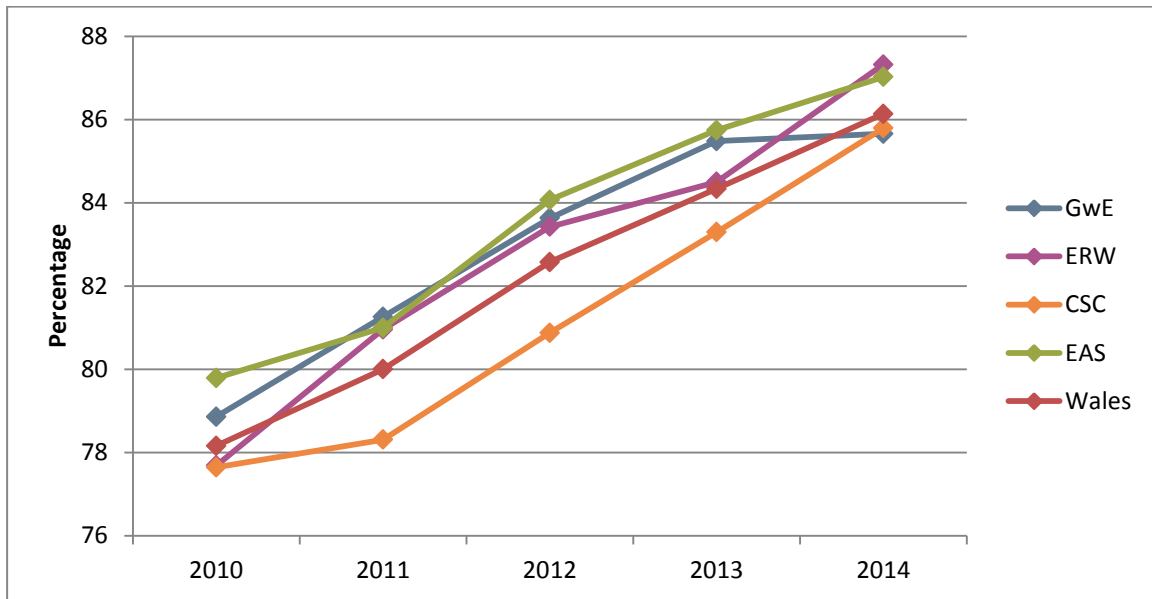
Source: Welsh Government (2014d)

Schools identified as causing concern, either through a consortium's monitoring process or as a result of an Estyn inspection, should receive significant challenge, support, monitoring and intervention from their regional consortium and local authority. The recent performance of these schools can be linked more confidently to the work of the regional consortia.

Standards of attainment

Standards at key stage 2 are improving nationally with only minor variations in the rate of improvement across the regions. Standards at key stage 2 are based on teacher assessments. As a result of weak moderation of teacher assessment in too many schools the data should be interpreted cautiously. Figure 8 shows the percentage of pupils achieving the key stage 2 core subject indicator (CSI) for the last five years.

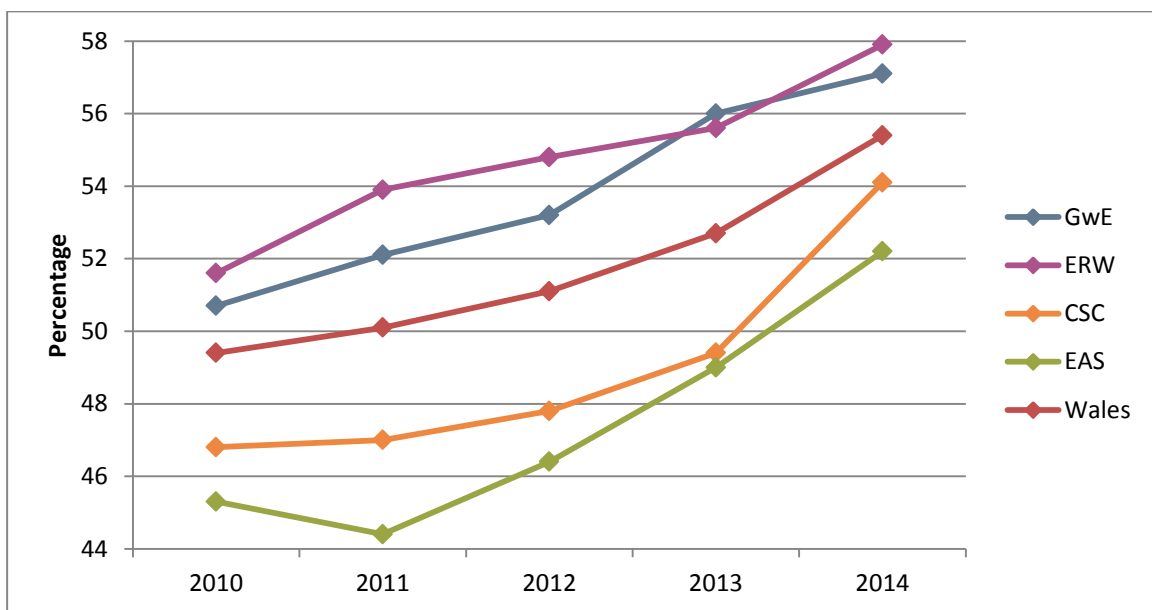
Figure 8: Percentage of pupils achieving the key stage 2 core subject indicator (CSI), by regional consortia and Wales overall, 2010-2014



Source: Welsh Government (2014e)

Standards at key stage 4 are improving nationally. At a regional level, standards are consistently highest in ERW and GwE, the two regions with the lowest levels of deprivation, although outcomes in north Wales were comparatively weak in 2014. There is a general trend of gradual improvement across the regions. Figure 9 shows the percentage of pupils achieving the level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics for the last five years.

Figure 9: Percentage of pupils achieving the key stage 4 level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics, by regional consortia and Wales overall, 2010-2014

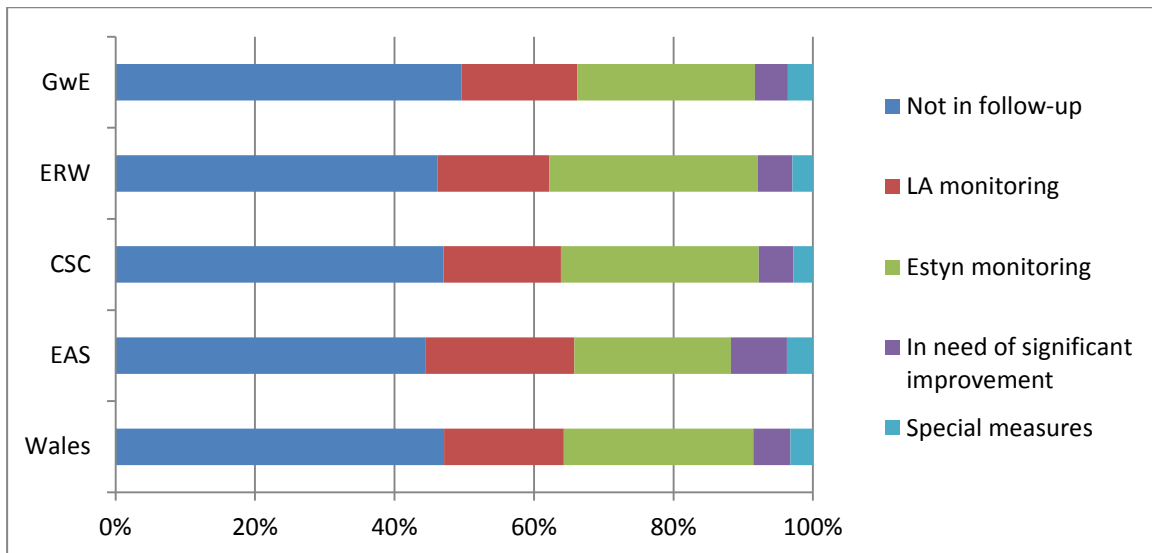


Source: Welsh Government (2014f)

School inspection outcomes

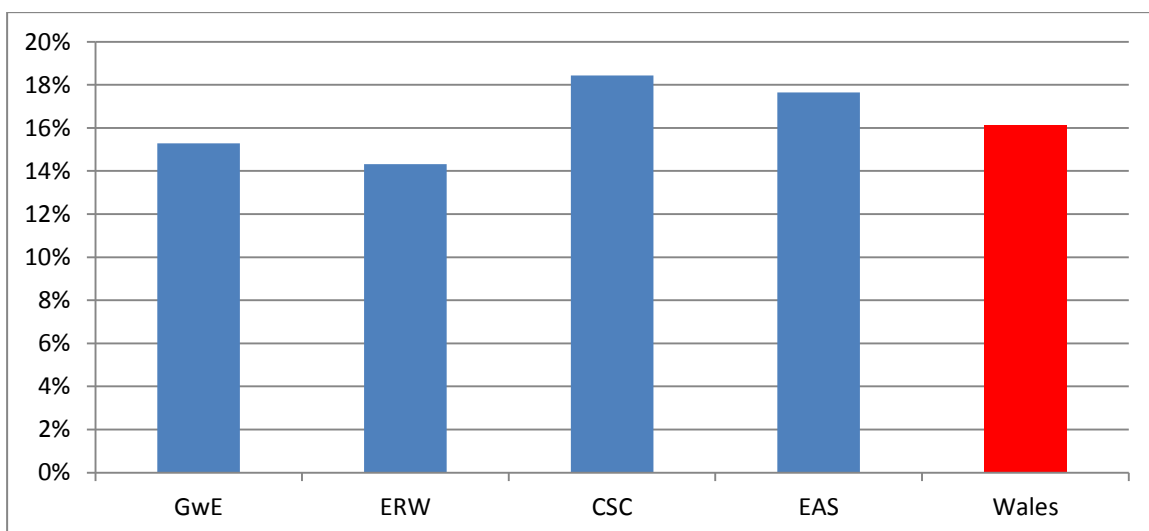
Figure 10 shows the percentage of schools⁷ inspected within each region since September 2010 that have required follow-up activity. A notably higher proportion of schools were placed into one of the two statutory categories for follow-up (in need of significant improvement and special measures) in EAS than the other three regions.

Figure 10: The percentage of schools requiring each type of follow-up activity after inspection, by regional consortia and Wales overall



Within each region, the percentage of schools identified as having excellent practice is reasonably similar, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Percentage of schools with excellent practice, by regional consortia and Wales overall



⁷ This includes primary, secondary and special schools and pupil referral units inspected from September 2010 to March 2015

Schools requiring follow-up are expected to make good progress in addressing the recommendations from their inspection. Schools requiring follow-up activity receive increased challenge, support, monitoring and intervention from the local authority and its regional consortium. If a school does not make enough progress then Estyn may escalate the level of follow-up. Escalating the level of follow-up activity often reflects poorly on the work of local authority and regional consortium. Every region has a small proportion of schools where the level of follow-up has been escalated because the school did not make enough progress following its inspection. Figure 12 shows the proportion of primary and secondary schools within each region where the level of follow-up was escalated between September 2012 and March 2015.

Figure 12: The proportion of primary and secondary schools within each regional consortia where the level of follow-up has been escalated, September 2012 to March 2015

Regional consortia	Number of primary and secondary schools inspected	Number of primary and secondary schools where the follow-up category was escalated	Percentage of primary and secondary schools where the follow-up category was escalated
CSC	72	3	4.2%
EAS	51	1	2.0%
GwE	73	2	2.7%
ERW	107	4	3.7%
Wales	303	10	3.3%

School categorisation

The Welsh Government published the categorisation for all primary and secondary schools in Wales in January 2015. According to the Welsh Government, the National System for School Categorisation evaluates and assesses schools and places them in a specific support category by using:

- a range of performance measures
- a self-evaluation by the school on its capacity to improve in relation to leadership and teaching and learning
- an assessment of the school's self-evaluation by challenge advisers in the regional consortia, agreed with the local authority, (Welsh Government, 2015b).

According to this categorisation, green schools are highly effective, yellow schools are effective, amber schools are in need of improvement and red schools are in need of greatest improvement, (Welsh Government, 2015a, p.19-20).

The percentage of primary schools in each category within each region and for Wales overall is shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Distribution of primary school categorisation, by regional consortia and Wales overall

	ERW	EAS	GwE	CSC	Wales
Green	16.4%	20.1%	8.8%	19.7%	15.6%
Yellow	49.5%	49.7%	61.0%	44.8%	51.7%
Amber	30.0%	25.1%	28.1%	28.5%	28.4%
Red	4.1%	5.0%	2.1%	6.9%	4.4%

Source: Welsh Government (2015b)

In each region around two-thirds of schools are categorised as green or yellow although slightly higher in EAS and GwE. The most notable features shown in the categorisation of primary schools are the:

- lower proportion of green schools in GwE (but a much higher proportion of yellow schools)
- lower proportion of red schools in GwE
- higher proportion of red schools in CSC

The percentage of secondary schools in each category within each region and for Wales overall is shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14: Distribution of secondary school categorisation, by regional consortia and Wales overall

	ERW	EAS	GwE	CSC	Wales
Green	20.3%	8.1%	10.9%	16.4%	14.7%
Yellow	56.3%	27.0%	49.1%	29.1%	42.2%
Amber	17.2%	51.4%	30.9%	38.2%	32.2%
Red	6.3%	13.5%	9.1%	16.4%	10.9%

Source: Welsh Government (2015b)

There is wide variation in the proportion of secondary schools in each category across the regions. In most consortia, there is a far lower proportion of secondary than primary schools are categorised as green or yellow. The most notable differences are that

- EAS has just 35.1% of schools in the green or yellow categories
- ERW has only 23.4% of schools in the red or amber categories compared to 64.9% in EAS, 54.5% in CSC and 40% in GWE
- ERW has more than twice the proportion of green schools as EAS
- CSC has more than twice the proportion of red schools as ERW

All of the regions moderated the implementation of categorisation within their region. However, there was very limited national moderation across the regions. Therefore it is difficult to draw conclusions from the differences in the distribution of schools across the categories as it is not clear how reliable the categorisation is at this stage. The variations may not necessarily reflect the relative performance of a school or the quality of its provision or leadership.

Appendix 6: Main findings and recommendations from the Auditor General for Wales' report on regional education consortia

On behalf of the Auditor General, Wales Audit Office (WAO) staff have examined whether the Welsh Government's arrangements for regional consortia are likely to deliver the intended improvement in support to schools and local authorities. In reviewing the progress of regional consortia, WAO staff focused on the effectiveness of governance arrangements based on the Good Governance Standard for Public Services. Their report, 'Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view', is based on visits to regional consortia carried out in collaboration with Estyn and other shared evidence, has been published at the same time as this report and is available from www.audit.wales.

Main findings

After an uncertain start, the foundations for regional school improvement services are being established and there are positive signs of progress, but remaining weaknesses are hindering the development of the whole system and the effective governance and financial management of regional consortia. This conclusion was reached on the basis of the following evidence:

- the National Model for Regional Working has provided a broadly agreed framework for a regional approach to school improvement. The Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia have shown a commitment to this approach and there are some positive signs of progress in the challenge provided to schools
- there were some continuing uncertainties about the nature and scope of consortia, and that some relationships between partners did not reflect the need for all main partners to collaborate to achieve improvement together. There has also been a lack of medium-term planning and insufficient focus on arrangements to assess value for money
- the governance of regional consortia is developing but the progress has been hindered by limited capacity, incomplete management structures, inadequate scrutiny of overall consortia arrangements, weaknesses in financial and performance management and insufficient openness and transparency.

Recommendations

R1 To clarify the nature and operation of consortia

The report found there to be a continuing uncertainty about some aspects of the nature of regional consortia and their present and future scope, and therefore recommend:

- the Welsh Government should take full account of the statutory responsibilities of local authorities, and take appropriate legal advice, when considering changes to the roles it expects of local authorities and the regional consortia
- the Welsh Government should update the National model to be less prescriptive on the structure under joint committees or boards whilst maintaining a focus on outcomes

- the Welsh Government and local authorities should develop and agree a consistent approach to the role of regional consortia and the Welsh government in school improvement interventions so that all parties are clear what they should be involved in and responsible for
- local authorities should clarify whether consortia services are jointly provided or are commissioned services (services provided under joint-committee arrangements are jointly provided services and are not commissioned services).

R2 To focus on outcomes through medium-term planning

The report found that the development of effective regional consortia was hindered by a focus on short-term actions and uncertainty about the future of consortia, and therefore recommend:

- as any possible local authority re-organisation will not be fully implemented until 2020, the Welsh Government and regional consortia should develop three-year plans for the further development, scope, and funding of regional consortia, linked to appropriate strategic objectives.

R3 To develop more collaborative relationships for the school improvement system

The development of the National Model for Regional Working involved many school improvement partners but we found that this had not led to the development of sufficiently collaborative relationships. The report therefore recommend:

- the Welsh Government should develop the present 'review and challenge' approach (where the Welsh Government hold regional consortia to account) to establish a more collaborative but robust comprehensive 'system review' approach in which all partners in the system share progress, challenges and issues openly
- regional consortia should develop improved arrangements for sharing practice and supporting efficiency (for example, one consortium could take the lead on tackling an issue or have functional responsibility for the development of a policy)
- the Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia should recognise the interdependency of all partners fulfilling their school improvement roles and agree an approach to:
 - information sharing and consultation about developments related to school improvement,
 - developing collaborative relationships of shared accountability and
 - undertaking system wide reviews, and an alignment of the understanding and position of regional consortia across all Welsh Government relevant strategies.

R4 To build effective leadership and attract top talent

Regional consortia, local authorities and the Welsh Government have all found difficulties in recruiting to senior leadership for education and the report found there had been limited action to address this. The report therefore recommends:

- the Welsh Government should work with local authority leaders to improve capacity and capability in the system to support strategic development and effective governance
- the Welsh Government and local authorities should collaborate to improve the attractiveness of education leadership roles to attract the most talented leaders for the school improvement system
- local authorities should collaborate to support the professional development of senior leaders and to ensure appropriate performance management arrangements are in place for senior leaders.

R5 To improve the effectiveness of governance and management of regional consortia

Whilst continuing progress is being made, the report found that regional consortia have not yet developed fully effective governance and financial management arrangements. Therefore, local authorities and their regional consortia should:

- improve their use of self-evaluation of their performance and governance arrangements and use this to support business planning and their annual reviews of governance to inform their annual governance statements
- improve performance management including better business planning, use of clear and measurable performance measures, and the assessment of value for money
- make strategic risk management an integral part of their management arrangements and report regularly at joint committee or board level
- develop their financial management arrangements to ensure that budgeting, financial monitoring and reporting cover all relevant income and expenditure, including grants funding spent through local authorities
- develop joint scrutiny arrangements of the overall consortia as well as scrutiny of performance by individual authorities, which may involve establishment of a joint scrutiny committee or co-ordinated work by local authority scrutiny committees
- ensure the openness and transparency of consortia decision making and arrangements
- recognise and address any potential conflicts of interest, and where staff have more than one employer, regional consortia should ensure lines of accountability are clear and all staff are aware of the roles undertaken and
- develop robust communications strategies for engagement with all key stakeholders.

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Glossary

Challenge adviser	A member of staff working for a regional consortium with responsibility for challenging and monitoring schools and ensuring that schools receive appropriate support for their areas for improvement.
Core subject indicator	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.
Estyn's inspection judgement descriptors	<p>Excellent – Many strengths, including significant examples of sector-leading practice</p> <p>Good – Many strengths and no important areas requiring significant improvement</p> <p>Adequate – Strengths outweigh areas for improvement</p> <p>Unsatisfactory – Important areas for improvement outweigh strengths</p>
Faith schools	In Wales, these are currently either Roman Catholic schools, Church in Wales schools or a partnership between both.
Joint committee	<p>A joint committee is formed when two or more local authorities agree that a certain function (or range of functions) will be carried out by those authorities jointly on a collaborative basis.</p> <p>A joint committee has no separate legal identity and no corporate status, so cannot enter into contracts in its own right. Therefore the local authorities establish a legal agreement that sets out how they work together. Such an agreement might, for example, name one authority to act as the employer for staff who provide services to all the local authorities involved.</p>
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 along with at least three other qualifications at level 2. A level 2 qualification is a GCSE or equivalent.
National Model	The Welsh Government's National Model for Regional Working.

<p>National Support Programme (NSP)</p>	<p>The National Support Programme (NSP) was launched by Welsh Government on 28 January 2013. This programme offers specialist, additional support to help teachers, headteachers and learning and teaching assistants to implement the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) effectively.</p> <p>The NSP provides hands-on support, tailored to the needs of individual schools and aims to build on and disseminate the good practice in literacy and numeracy learning and teaching which already exists in schools. It focuses on clusters of schools, collaborating with regional consortia and working with system leaders to ensure successful implementation of the LNF, (Welsh Government, 2013c).</p>
<p>OECD</p>	<p>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</p>
<p>PISA assessments</p>	<p>The Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA is an international study that was launched by the OECD in 1997. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years by assessing 15-year-olds' competencies in the key subjects of reading, mathematics and science.</p>
<p>Regional consortium</p>	<p>Unless specified otherwise, in this report the term refers to the provision set up by a group of local authorities to deliver school improvement services as set out in the Welsh Government's (2014a) National Model for Regional Working. This may not be the only consortium working regionally on aspects education.</p>
<p>Schools Challenge Cymru</p>	<p>Within the overall strategy for school improvement set out in the National Model for Regional Working, Schools Challenge Cymru involves schools that have been in lower Bands over the past three years, and where there are particularly high levels of pupils eligible for free school meals. There are four main themes for the Challenge, drawing on the experiences of the London and Greater Manchester Challenges. These are leadership, learning and teaching, the pupil, and the school and the community – including parents or carers. Schools in the Challenge have four core entitlements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 'school on a page' template that provides a snapshot of where their school is on its improvement journey and what its strengths and areas for improvement are. • A committed, experienced Adviser to support and challenge the school on how it can improve, and to

	<p>help broker support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Single School Development Plan, showing how the schools efforts for improvement are drawn together, including an entitlement to draw on additional resource, as needed. • An Accelerated Improvement Board to support the school’s leadership through its improvement journey, (Welsh Government, 2014b, p4-5).
<p>System leaders</p>	<p>The Welsh Government described system leaders as:</p> <p>credible experts in the eyes of schools [who would] be able to support and challenge a range of school improvement challenges from ‘turnaround’ of an underperforming school, tackling ‘coasting’ schools and helping schools on their journey from ‘good to excellent’, (Welsh Government, 2012, p.32-33).</p> <p>The government provided a national specification of the role and expected system leaders to be drawn from either a local authority or school background, including current serving school leaders.</p>

Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on visits to all four regional consortia plus a range of other evidence. The fieldwork visits took place in partnership with Wales Audit Office staff between November 2014 and January 2015. During these visits, discussions took place with:

- regional consortia staff including challenge advisers
- senior local authority officers
- elected members
- headteachers selected from an approximate 10% representative sample of schools across the region
- governors from the selected schools

The regional consortia provided a wide range of evidence for consideration before, during and after the visits. This included, for example, legal agreements, policies, plans, self-evaluations, reports to scrutiny and records of work with schools. The latest date that evidence could be submitted for consideration for this survey was 31 January 2015.

Diocesan directors of education provided a joint written view of their relationship and work with regional consortia.

Additional evidence was drawn from:

- pre-inspection reports from local authorities for schools
- progress reports from local authorities for schools in follow-up
- inspection findings for schools and local authorities
- performance data
- school categorisation

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