A report on the quality of the school improvement services provided by the North Wales Consortium

North Wales Consortium
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by

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Context

Regional profile

GwE provides school improvement services for a region of six local authorities: Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Wrexham and Anglesey.

The number of pupils of compulsory school age in 2015 was 80,110. This represents 22% of all pupils in Wales. There are 439 maintained schools in the region, 28% of all maintained schools in Wales (PLASC, 2015).

The percentage of pupils of compulsory school age who are eligible for free school meals is 16%, which is lower than the national figure of 19%. This level of eligibility is the lowest of the four regional consortia (PLASC, 2015).

In the region, 31% 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 2% of the population in the region and this is just below the Wales average.

As of 31 March 2015, 1,000 children in the region are looked after by a local authority and this represents 18% of looked-after children in Wales.

Performance context

North Wales has the lowest proportion of pupils eligible for school meals of the four Welsh regions.

Overall, the rate of improvement in pupils' outcomes in North Wales across many indicators over three years to 2015 has been the slowest of the four regions. However, since September 2012, over half of secondary schools have been judged good or better for their standards when inspected. This is a higher proportion when compared to the rest of Wales.

In nearly all the main indicators in Foundation Phase and key stage 4, at least half of the region's schools are in the lower 50% compared to similar schools in 2015. In both these phases, this has been a declining picture over the last few years as the performance in other regions has improved at faster rates. However, teacher assessed outcomes at key stages 2 and 3 are more positive when compared to those of similar schools across Wales.

Over the last three years, performance in the Foundation Phase and key stage 2 has increased modestly when compared to the overall rates across Wales. However, overall there is only a minimal difference between the regions in both phases with approximately 17 out of every 20 pupils achieving the Foundation Phase indicator and core subject indicator in each phase respectively across all the regions. When inspected, a higher proportion of primary schools have been judged good or better for their standards since September 2012 compared to the rest of Wales as a whole.

The proportion of pupils gaining the expected level in the core subject indicator at key stage 3 has increased faster than the rate in Wales over the last three years. In 2015, performance was the highest in Wales. Over half of schools in the region are in the upper 50% when compared to similar schools in Wales. However, performance at key stage 3 is at odds with the performance at key stage 4.

At key stage 4, the proportion 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 much slower rate than that seen across Wales as a whole over the last three years. Since 2013, the rate of improvement in this measure has been one third that of Wales. Performance in every local authority in the region is no higher than the benchmark target set by the Welsh Government in 2015. Almost two-thirds of schools in the region are in the lower 50% when compared to similar schools. In addition, over one-third of schools are in the bottom 25% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools.

The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved at the slowest rate across the regions over the last three years. In 2015, the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals who achieve the level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics is below the average rate in Wales by around two percentage points. The gap in performance between girls and boys is similar to the picture nationally. However, the performance of boys and girls in English and mathematics is too variable across local authorities.

Performance in the average capped wider points score has broadly remained flat over the last three years, although it declined in 2015. It is now in line with performance across Wales despite being consistently higher in the preceding four years. In 2015, performance in half of the six local authorities in the region was below the benchmark target set by the Welsh Government. Less than half of the schools in the region are in the upper 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools, and over one-third of schools are in the bottom 25% compared to similar schools.

Performance in the level 1 threshold has improved at a slower rate than across Wales over the last three years. However, the majority of secondary schools are in the upper 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools.

The proportion of pupils achieving five A* or A grades at GCSE or equivalent has declined over the last three years. In 2015, the proportion of pupils achieving this measure is lower than that in Wales and performance across the local authorities is too variable.

Performance in English and mathematics is relatively weak across the region. In line with the other indicators at key stage 4, the rate of improvement has been the weakest out of the four regions in both subjects. In 2015, for both English and mathematics, only around one-third of schools are in the upper 50% when their performance is compared to that of similar schools across Wales. Furthermore, too many schools are in the bottom 25% for these subjects.

Attendance at primary and secondary schools has improved in recent years, but at slower rates than the rest of Wales. In 2015, attendance was just below the Welsh average in primary schools and just above the Welsh average in secondary schools.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure that the school improvement service uses data, target setting and tracking procedures more effectively to challenge and support schools in order to improve performance of all learners across schools and local authorities, particularly at key stage 4.

R2 Improve the quality of evaluation in the delivery of school improvement services.

R3 Improve the rigour of the arrangements for identifying and managing risk.

R4 Ensure that business and operational plans contain clear success criteria and that progress against these are monitored effectively.

R5 Clarify the strategic role of the regional networks and their accountability to the Joint Committee.

R6 Develop an appropriate framework to assess value for money; ensure that the business plan is accompanied by a medium-term financial plan and that work-streams are fully costed.

Main findings

Support for School Improvement: Adequate

The consortium knows its schools increasingly well. Pre-inspection reports for schools provided by the local authority, following advice from the consortium, are largely found to be consistent with inspection outcomes. Inspectors have fewer concerns about these reports than in other regions in Wales. Inspection outcomes also show that schools are, in the main, categorised appropriately.

In September 2015, the consortium introduced a range of challenge and support programmes for schools. These useful programmes are tailored to provide suitably proportionate services to schools based on their categorisation or school type and ensure that challenge advisers are deployed appropriately. Each programme sets out clearly how the consortium will work with the school and describes the roles and responsibilities of the consortium, school, local authority and, where relevant, diocesan authority. In all aspects of its work, the consortium works equally effectively through the medium of Welsh or English and provides equitable challenge and support to Welsh, bilingual and English medium schools.

Prior to 2015, a high proportion of resource and focus in the consortium was given to improving schools categorised as red and amber. This activity resulted in improvements in many of these schools. However, the rate of improvement in other schools slowed and the consortium did not identify shortcomings that resulted in unexpectedly weak outcomes at key stage 4 in 2015. Inconsistencies in target-setting and tracking projected outcomes across the region's secondary schools meant the consortium did not challenge under-performance robustly enough. Although the consortium has since provided further guidance to schools on how targets should be set, the resulting targets agreed by schools, local authorities and the consortium result in regional targets that are much higher than the targets the consortium had previously agreed in its business plan, particularly in relation to the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals. The performance indicators for which schools set targets, and progress is tracked, are all relevant. A suitable system is in place to monitor the progress of schools against these performance indicators, and this is used effectively to challenge schools during the year. However, despite recent weak outcomes, secondary schools are not required to agree a target for five A*-A grade performance at key stage 4 and progress against this indicator is not tracked.

The consortium has improved its information management system. Consortium staff now have access to, and use more effectively, a better range and quality of information to support their work. However, data is not always used effectively or appropriately enough in evaluating programmes and projects to support school improvement.

The quality of the work of challenge advisers has improved since the consortium started in its current form in April 2013. The consortium has provided good support to develop the role and quality of work of challenge advisers and other staff involved in school improvement work. Most schools are challenged appropriately. The

consortium's processes for quality assuring the work of challenge advisers are suitable and helpful. However, challenge advisers' evaluations in a few schools are too generous or too vague and do not evaluate leadership well enough.

The challenge and support programme for green category schools and 'strong or well established' yellow category schools introduces a purposeful model for schools to challenge and support each other. This is designed to move the region towards meeting one of its strategic objectives, a 'self-improving system' where leaders of education provide 'mutual support and challenge to raise standards in all schools'. Headteachers are very positive about this cultural change and exemplify early benefits anecdotally. There are examples of robust, helpful challenge between headteachers engaged in the first year of this programme. However, evaluations in peer review reports tend to rely too heavily on data without checking this against first-hand evidence such as lesson observations or scrutiny of learners' work. Challenge advisers join discussions between headteachers but do not always carry out their quality assurance role rigorously enough. The recent introduction of 'co-leading schools' is also contributing to the emerging 'self-improving system' by developing the capacity of schools with excellent practice in specific areas to support other schools. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this approach.

The consortium provides some support directly for schools but also brokers support from external sources such as headteachers within the region or independent consultants. The consortium's support programmes for schools in greatest need set out their action for the academic year and accompanying resources. However, the actions to support these schools are not always specific enough and this could restrict their impact.

Support for schools in improving the quality of teaching and learning and leadership in literacy, numeracy and core subjects is a strong focus of support for schools. Overall, the availability and quality of support have improved in the region, although work is not always evaluated well enough. The consortium has recently appointed a strategic leader for the Foundation Phase to addresses weaknesses in the consortium's work to date in challenging and supporting schools.

The consortium has been slow to provide clear and consistent challenge and support for schools on reducing the impact of deprivation on outcomes. While this is a focus of challenge adviser work, schools' use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant is not monitored or evaluated consistently rigorously.

The consortium has developed a comprehensive and coherent range of programmes to develop leadership in the region, from preparing teachers to take on their first leadership role through to developing experienced and successful headteachers. Much of the programme is too new to evaluate, with some aspects yet to be delivered. The middle leadership development programme started over a year ago but the evaluation report commissioned by the consortium does not focus enough on impact.

The consortium works effectively with senior officers and service managers from each local authority to share relevant information about schools and support each other's work. As a result, for example, challenge advisers take good account of

important contextual information about schools and local authorities have sufficient intelligence to support the use of their statutory powers of intervention in schools causing concern. The consortium works effectively with the Welsh Government's Schools Challenge Cymru programme.

The consortium has an appropriate focus on national developments such as curriculum and qualifications changes and approaches to support the professional development of teachers. It is engaging with schools in the early work to guide them through change although the capacity to support schools effectively is variable. The consortium is improving its ability to connect schools together across the region for aspects of support that it does not provide for directly, such as support in non-core subject areas.

Leadership: Adequate

During the first 18 months of its operation, the consortium's leadership focused primarily on meeting its obligations to the service level agreements with its six associated local authorities and reacting to the needs of schools. A lack of capacity in GwE's senior leadership team meant that progress in developing an effective school improvement service was limited.

Since then, senior leaders in the six local authorities as well as new appointees to GwE's senior management team have revised their approach to the work of the regional school improvement service. This approach is underpinned by a vision of a self-improving system that is generally well understood by the majority of stakeholders. As a result schools, local authorities and elected members have a growing, if fragile, confidence in the consortium's capability to deliver an effective school improvement service.

The governance structure to support the service is outlined in an Inter Authority Agreement which defines the terms and reference and delegated powers of the Joint Committee. The consortium has been slow to ensure that the governance arrangements align with the expectations of the Welsh Government's National Model for Regional Working. For example, the Advisory Board and the management board were only constituted in the last year.

The Joint Committee is providing the local authorities' senior leaders with the means to exercise their oversight of the work of the consortium and generally the members understand and discharge their responsibilities appropriately. However, the strategic overview and accountability of joint working within a range of partnerships is not fully developed. The management board provides appropriate challenge to the consortium's officers in most areas, although they do not sufficiently challenge the quality of the consortium's self-evaluation processes and reports. The Advisory Board is providing constructive challenge and an independent perspective to the work of the consortium after an initial period where they were uncertain about the scope of their role. Additional groups of stakeholders, such as the headteacher and governors' user groups, support GwE's managing director and senior management well.

GwE's managing director and the senior management team have provided purposeful leadership in developing a coherent approach to the school improvement service during the last year and a half. There is a better balance between challenge and support to schools and there are indications that the approach is having a positive impact on improving outcomes in schools categorised as red and amber. There is less evidence at this early stage that the school-to-school working and peer reviews in schools categorised green and yellow are as successful.

There is a growing level of co-operation and trust between GwE and its six associated local authorities. GwE supports the scrutiny function at an individual local authority level by providing reports on school performance and progress against the priorities in the individual local authority's plan. The reports are generally accessible and clear. However, the arrangements between the scrutiny committees and GwE officers are not always planned sufficiently in advance and this brings unnecessary pressure on officers to respond at short notice.

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

Improving quality: Adequate

Senior leaders consider the views of most stakeholders appropriately. They regularly consult with schools and other partners to gauge opinions, on the overall quality of the school improvement service as well as on specific aspects such as practitioner training courses or the implementation of new initiatives.

In general, leaders and managers use a suitable range of first-hand evidence to inform the self-evaluation process. This includes analysing data and assessing the current performance of schools and the consortium against relevant comparators and benchmarks. The recent improvement in the consortium's data collection, management and analysis has enabled challenge advisers to support and inform their work with schools in greater depth. However, senior leaders do not always use data at pupil level effectively enough to inform their judgements about strengths and areas for improvement in all performance outcomes, for example in analysing the outcomes of groups of pupils, including vulnerable pupils, at a regional level.

Over the last year, the consortium has developed a number of key programmes, such as the practitioner leadership and development programmes and the revised consortium's challenge and support framework. It is too early for the consortium to evaluate the effectiveness of many of these programmes. However, the few evaluations that have been conducted rely too heavily on a narrow breadth of evidence, tend to focus on process rather than outcomes and are generally too descriptive. This hinders senior leaders' abilities to reflect on the overall effectiveness of the initiatives.

Senior leaders use the evidence from self-evaluation activities to inform the current self-evaluation report. This report provides, in the main, a comprehensive view of the consortium's work. For each key aspect, the report includes a useful brief overview of the strengths and areas for improvement and an outline of the improvements currently underway. However, the self-evaluation report is generally too descriptive and lacks sufficiently robust evaluation of the effectiveness of the consortium's work.

In general, senior leaders use the information from the self-evaluation report appropriately and the recommendations in the Estyn thematic report of June 2015 'Improving Schools through Regional Consortia' to inform their improvement planning priorities. The current business plan for 2015-2018 sets out appropriately the consortium's aims for improving pupil outcomes and for further developing the consortium's internal organisational structures. The aims are underpinned by five main priority areas, which include relevant targets for improving teaching and learning in schools at each key stage and for improving the quality of leadership for school practitioners at all levels. In addition, the priorities focus well on supporting schools to become self-improving and on ensuring that the consortium is consistent in its support and challenge of schools in the region. The business plan includes a workstream for the 2015-2016 period, which appropriately identifies the actions, the lead responsibilities and the monitoring responsibilities for delivering the improvements in each of the five priority areas. However, many of the priorities, their associated milestones, and the delivery actions within the workstreams lack measurable targets or clear success criteria. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to measure progress within the region accurately enough.

The Advisory Board has recently developed a process for identifying and managing risks. This includes a useful risk register, with appropriate references to the possible impact of the identified risks on finances and governance and on achieving the business plan priorities. However, these risks are not considered or evaluated systematically by the Joint Committee or other groups to which they are assigned. As a result, the consortium lacks appropriate ownership of the risks in order to work effectively to mitigate their possible effect.

The consortium has robust performance management arrangements. The process includes an appropriate evaluation of staff performance against previous objectives and opportunities to set objectives that derive from staff self-assessments. The agreed performance objectives are generally specific and measurable, focusing fittingly on the priorities of the business plan and on the individuals' direct work with schools. There are suitable arrangements in place across the consortium to deal with underperformance through worthwhile staff training and development and agreed informal and formal processes.

Partnerships: Adequate

In general, the consortium works effectively in partnership with a range of regional networks to deliver educational services not presently included in its core responsibilities. GwE and all six authorities are represented on each network by relevant members of staff.   However, the strategic role of the regional networks and their accountability to the Joint Committee is not clear and the future direction of aspects of their work within the National Model has not been fully identified. The Management Board has identified these issues as risks and has appropriate plans to review the roles and responsibilities of the regional networks by September 2016.

The School Improvement Network provides an effective forum for senior education officers from the region's six authorities and GwE's senior challenge advisers to work collaboratively at both a strategic and operational level. It also undertakes appropriate task and finish responsibilities on behalf of the Management Board. For

example, it recently carried out an audit of acting headteachers across the region and used the findings effectively to develop a regional support programme that meets local need.

The Foundation Phase Network works well to develop aspects of good practice and joint approaches to training across the region. The recent appointment of a senior challenge adviser for the Foundation Phase strengthens GwE's capacity to develop the regional strategy and to address weaknesses in the consortium's work to date in supporting schools.

As a result of the work undertaken by the Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion Network, systems and processes are more consistent across the region. For example, there is a cohesive approach to co-ordinating services for pupils who are looked after by the local authorities, which has improved arrangements for pupils as they move between schools. Network members have a good range of information about vulnerable learners in their own local authority. However, there is not yet a collective understanding of the achievement and progress of these pupils across the region.

The Welsh-Medium and Capacity-Building Network works well to promote greater collaboration and sharing of expertise in Welsh-medium education and improve equality of provision by developing and sharing policies and examples of good practice. The network has co-ordinated the work to extend the 'Siarter Iaith' ('Language Charter') effectively across the region and Wales.

The Information Communications Technology and Data Network and the Governor Support Network oversee and co-ordinate a range of relevant services. However, the impact of their work is not evaluated well enough and, as a result, the strategic planning of these services is not effective.

The Finance and Resources Network works well to address the key issues affecting the use of finances for schools and GwE. For example, the network presented a useful joint paper to the Management Board on the use of the Education Improvement Grant. The network is also undertaking valuable work on the consistency of delegation of grant funding to schools.

GwE maintains effective partnerships with further education institutions through its presence on the Regional 14-19 Network. The network develops and delivers collaborative courses that meet the region's needs well.

The consortium has developed good partnership links with the diocesan authorities who contribute appropriately to the consortium's strategic and operational planning through their involvement in the Joint Committee and user groups.

Collaboration with the other regional consortia in Wales is developing appropriately. As a result, GwE has developed and delivered well-received development programmes for experienced heads and middle leaders in schools outside of North Wales. The consortium has learned from the expertise of other consortia, particularly in developing the Challenge and Support Programme, data collection systems and professional development programmes.

GwE's developing partnership with Bangor University is providing useful opportunities to enhance the quality and range of its services. Early evaluations of the first of three collaborative projects, involving 39 schools, suggest that pupils made significant progress in their reading skills. This partnership is also aiming to improve processes for evaluating aspects of GwE's work. However, it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of these developments.

Resource management: Unsatisfactory

The consortium generally has effective financial management processes in place. Communication and consultation about financial arrangements are effective with both core funding and grant expenditure kept under regular review by GwE staff, the host local authority and the joint committee. However, GwE has not fully developed its financial analysis to support the delivery of its three-year business plan. GwE has yet to develop a medium-term financial plan or workforce plan aligned to its business plan. This means that, although GwE makes increasingly effective use of data to identify its key priorities, the link between the business planning process and financial planning decisions is insufficiently developed because the workstreams that underpin the business plan do not always identify clearly the resources to be used.

The local authorities' core funding to GwE is in line with the National Model for Regional Working recommendations. However around 11 per cent of GwE's core funding is retained by the local authorities to deliver governor advice and support, regional ICT, and specialist HR support through regional networks. The delivery of the Foundation Phase, 14-19 learning pathways and Welsh in Education strategic plans and Welsh in Education grant are still delivered by the local authorities and are funded by the non-delegated element of the Education Improvement Grant. GwE recognises the limited opportunities to achieve financial efficiencies in its current model but is exploring the inclusion of additional areas of work in the future.

Officers had considered a range of budget reductions for 2016-17, however, the final reduction of 1.6% was lower than anticipated. The impact of the final budget for 2016-17 was being fully assessed at the time of the inspection but GwE considers that it will be able to continue to deliver its services and meet its financial commitments within that reduced funding position.

GwE recognises that there is further work required to align grant allocations with its priorities, although progress to date has been limited. Challenge advisers are now required to challenge schools on their use of grant funding but there is not a clear set of criteria to assess the use of this funding and there are inconsistencies between schools about identifying the impact of the use of grant funding on pupil outcomes. GwE does not currently systematically collate the information gathered on schools' use of grant funding and therefore opportunities to share effective practice and wider learning are not fully exploited. In 2015, GwE commissioned a report on the use of Pupil Deprivation Grant funding by a sample of schools but the report did not identify the cost of the different interventions nor the effectiveness of those interventions.

An initial saving of around 20% was achieved when GwE was established and efficiencies were found in 2015 across management and administrative functions. These savings were redirected to increase investment in working with schools but to

date no formal framework has been developed to assess the wider value for money that GwE provides. There is not a consistent view across all stakeholders of how the value for money of GwE's activities can be measured, with a considerable emphasis being placed on key stage 4 level 2+ results over other business plan objectives.

GwE's annual review for 2014-2015 did not clearly link the cost of services with the outcomes it achieved. For example the annual review identifies that effective use was made of its commissioning budget. However, the criteria by which that judgement was made are not clearly stated and no report was provided to the Joint Committee nor the Management Board on the use of this budget.

GwE does not regularly evaluate and review its services and initiatives during their implementation phase to identify areas for improvement nor value for money. GwE has recently identified that evaluations of its Middle Leaders and Practicing Head Teachers' programmes had been based on limited evidence, leading to the need for a more systematic evaluation approach to its Development Programme and Challenge and Support Programme. However, that approach is yet to be agreed by the Joint Committee.

GwE and the consortium recognise the need to evolve an approach to measuring its value for money and to develop processes to demonstrate that its use of resources will have the maximum impact on pupil outcomes. The deficit in critically evaluating the outcomes achieved against the costs of delivery means that GwE is not currently well placed to assess how best to use its resources in order to achieve the aims and priorities in its business plan.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

Iwan Roberts	Reporting Inspector
Mark Campion	Team Inspector
Jane McCarthy	Team Inspector
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Clive Phillips	Team Inspector
Cath Evans	Team Inspector
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Huw Watkins	Team Inspector
Sue Davies	Team Inspector
Sian Clark	WAO
Gareth Jones	WAO
Rhys Hughes	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.