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Welsh Government

POLICY AND STRATEGY, DOCUMENT

# Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements: letter to the minister

Letter to the minister from the review team summarising the progress of the review of the roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales.

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Dear Minister,

Thank you for the opportunity to lead on the review of the of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and the delivery of school improvement arrangements. Schools are currently facing significant challenges and it is vitally important that the school improvement system in Wales is providing the best and most cost-effective support infrastructure to enable our education leaders to lead, our teachers to teach, and in turn our learners to learn.

We were pleased to be able to spend time with you on 7<sup>th</sup> December to discuss our extensive engagement with colleagues across the education sector in Wales. I now write to you to relay what has been shared with us during that engagement. What follows is a summary of the main themes relating to a variety of areas across the education system in Wales - locally, regionally and nationally - which were raised during our meetings with colleagues as part of our evidence gathering phase of the review. We have been struck by the strength and consistency of views across the school sector.

During Phase 1 of our engagement we gathered evidence by listening to as wide a range of views as possible from those leading schools and those within the Middle Tier.

- We held face-to-face school leader workshops in all Local Authority [LA] areas in Wales between mid-September and late October. We asked LAs to nominate the school leaders to attend.
- In all we spoke face to face to nearly 300 school leaders during this process and we heard from a mix of phases and specialisms including Welsh Medium, Special and PRUs.
- We also held a joint Union online meeting and responded to requests for two further online meetings organised by individual Unions – one with 30 Headteachers organised by NAHT and another with 9 teachers organised by the NASWUT.

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- In addition, we received 353 responses to an online survey. The survey was anonymised so some responses may have come from those who also attended workshops.
- In total this means we have heard from 350-650 school leaders which equates to 25% to 45% of school leaders in Wales.
- We have spoken to the Managing Directors, or Leads, of the current five Regional Consortia/Partnerships – Central South, EAS, GwE, the Mid Wales Partnership, and Partneriaeth.
- We have spoken to officer representatives from 22 LAs – in some cases this was a conversation with the Education Director, in other cases the Education Director was joined by their Chief Executive and/or other members of their school improvement teams.
- We have also spoken to key national partners such as Estyn, NAEL and EWC.

We have been struck by the consistency of the messages we have heard from school leaders across Wales in both the face-to-face sessions and the responses to the survey. It is clear that the pandemic has had many detrimental effects on our learners, which in turn, has created many challenges for those seeking to provide the best possible learning experience for them.

In their responses:

- School leaders said they feel overwhelmed by the amount of change in the system and felt that there was a lack of clarity about national reforms in some key areas like curriculum, progression and ALN.
- School leaders expressed serious concerns about the value-added by the Regional Consortia. There was a lot of concern about a culture of ‘done to’ rather than ‘done with’. Concerns about the variability and lack of consistency in the quality of support from RC was also often noted.
- They saw many of the requests from the middle tier as being unnecessary, counter-productive and adding bureaucracy. They sought clarity about the roles and impact of all elements within the Middle Tier.

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- School leaders shared deep frustrations with the grant funding process - the bureaucracy associated with it and uncertainty it causes for school leaders. They also sought transparency around the funding process and delegation to schools.
- School leaders felt there was little or no support for some of the biggest challenges currently facing schools following the pandemic, such as attendance and behaviour.
- School leaders said they and their staff felt overwhelmed by the current professional learning [PL] offer - “we struggle to decipher the white noise of the PL offer”. They also said they didn’t have the time to access much of it and when they did it was of variable quality.
- School leaders shared concerns about the value-added by national partners such as NAEL, as it is currently constituted, and the EWC, and noted concerns about duplication in the PL offer across the Middle Tier.
- School leaders noted a desire to see greater resources being distributed directly within a local context, and in a timely manner, to enable a more localised focus of collaboration.

In identifying areas that are working well school leaders noted:

- School-to-school and cluster working is seen as the most important element of support and school leaders think this should be the foundation for the School Improvement [SI] system moving forward.
- Existing national and regional networks are helping connect schools together across Wales but are not available to, or accessed by, all schools currently.
- The new approach from Estyn during inspections was welcomed by the majority of school leaders but some concerns remain about the consistency and quality of inspection.
- School leaders have a strong identification with their locality and there are strong relationships with their LAs in many areas which were strengthened during COVID.
- School leaders were most confident about self-evaluation and improvement planning and there were some positive examples of peer challenge and

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support developing.

- A minority of respondents commented positively on areas of the support from Regional Consortia, particularly where they welcomed the support and challenge from their Improvement Partner and/or where they were positive about specific curriculum or PL support received.

There were more mixed views from Local Authorities and Regional Consortia about how well the current system of support works and differences about what the future model of support should look like.

A clear majority of LAs are in favour of exploring a move away from current arrangements for regional support, or have already moved away from it, to partnerships between LAs which allow more localised approaches.

- LA reasons for moving away from a regional model related to their accountability for SI, the ability to join up SI support with wider local services, and their concerns about the quality of support and value for money of RC at a time of significant financial pressures.
- A smaller minority of LAs were very happy with the current regional model and didn't want change. They were concerned about their capacity in being able to play the necessary role in school improvement. They valued the support from their RC, thought it had worked well in supporting schools and had seen the impact of this in improvements in Estyn judgements.
- LAs also felt that a clearer national direction was needed and that now was the time to reset the national mission and help schools focus on a smaller number of priorities.
- RCs were most positive about the way the current system worked and pointed to their impact in improving Estyn outcomes, their support of school-to-school working and the breadth and range of support they could offer as the key benefits of regional working.

Given the consistency of the messages we have heard across Wales in both the face-to-face sessions and the responses to the survey, the direction of travel

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that school leaders and a majority of LAs want to see is clear and is based around the following key elements:

- an opportunity to lead on school improvement matters through a greater focus on local collaboration and partnership working between school leaders and their Local Authority
- partnerships between more than one LA with a move away from a wider regional model of support
- stronger national leadership with clearer national priorities for schools and a simplification of the national funding mechanisms with as much resource as possible going directly to schools or supporting groups of schools to work together.

I hope that you will agree that we have used Phase 1 to build a strong evidence base on the current system. We now propose to use Phase 2 to respond to the views expressed by exploring how school improvement can best be supported at three levels by investigating the following issues:

## **1. How can school-to-school working best be supported at a local level?**

This would mean exploring in phase 2 how to strengthen collective responsibility; the role of funding, inspection, and governance in incentivising collaboration across schools and clusters; the needs of different phases and types of school leadership; and what local partnership structures might best support greater system leadership and a sense of ownership by schools at a local level.

## **2. How can school-to-school collaboration and networking continue to be supported across local**

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## **authorities and nationally?**

This would mean exploring in phase 2 how to encourage or require collaboration across and between local authority areas with agreed and nationally consistent principles; how to ensure school improvement is supported equitably regardless of the size and capacity of the local authority; and how all schools might have access to other regional or national school improvement networks.

### **3. How school improvement should best be supported at national level?**

This would mean exploring in phase 2 what structures might be required at national level to support school improvement and continued delivery of PL, curriculum and leadership support; how we can best simplify funding processes, get more resources into schools, and support schools' and local areas' work on improvement; and how Welsh Government can communicate a clearer and simpler set of national priorities and give stronger national leadership and direction.

We recognise that getting the detail right will be important before any change is implemented. In any potential reconfiguration within a new model, all elements working in partnership and in aligned way, will need to be able to provide the required quality of support and guidance to enable school leaders to provide the best possible opportunities for learners. A focussed engagement with colleagues will be important given the remarkably consistent messages that we have heard. We look forward to discussing further with you, the Director of Education and his team, how this might be achieved during the next phase of our work so that we may provide the best possible educational experience for our learners in Wales and the best possible culture of support and empowerment for those who lead and teach in our schools.

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Yours sincerely  
Dylan E Jones  
18.xii.23

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