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# Evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru: Implementation in Pathways to Success schools (2014/15)

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# **Evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru: Implementation in Pathways to Success Schools (2014/15)**

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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## **Glossary of terms**

AIB	Accelerated Improvement Board
Consortia	Regional Education Consortia
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
L2I	Level 2 Inclusive is 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent, including a GCSE grade A*-C in Mathematics and either English or Welsh first language
LA	Local Authority
PtS	Pathways to Success schools
SCC	Schools Challenge Cymru
National Tests	National Reading and Numeracy Tests
School cluster	A group of schools in which there is evidence of partnership-working between primary and secondary schools
SDP	School Development Plan (in some schools this is referred to as a School Improvement Plan)
(S)SDP	Single School Development Plan. This term is used to differentiate between plans that have been developed following the introduction of 'new' guidance by the Welsh Government in 2014 and those that were developed prior to its publication
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

## Executive Summary

1. Launched in June 2014, Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC) represents a concerted effort by the Welsh Government to respond to variability in the performance of different schools across Wales in supporting the development of their pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A key element of the programme has been the recruitment of up to 40 Pathways to Success (PtS) schools deemed as underperforming and facing the greatest barriers to improvement. Initially identified by the Welsh Government, in partnership with Regional Education Consortia (hereafter termed Consortia), each school and their wider cluster will receive a targeted programme of support over a two-year period. Subsequently the Welsh Government decided that support should be made available to PtS schools for a third year.
2. Drawing on learning from previous initiatives of this type, such as the London and Greater Manchester Challenges, PtS schools have been encouraged, through the programme, to reflect on the quality of their leadership and management, teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of their work with the wider community. By making improvements in these areas, it is hoped that SCC will support an improvement in pupil learning outcomes in PtS schools, as well as generating lessons from these developments to help strengthen the capacity of the whole education system to improve itself.
3. In order to help them overcome their barriers to improvement, PtS schools have been able to access a number of different types of support. Key elements have included:
  - support from a named **Schools Challenge Cymru Adviser (Adviser)** to help Senior Leaders in PtS schools identify approaches by which to overcome their barriers to improvement
  - the opportunity to apply for **additional funding** from the Welsh Government to support the implementation of the school improvement strategy

- support from an **Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB)**
  - the opportunity to develop a **(Single) School Development Plan**.
4. The evaluation has two overarching aims:
- to consider the implementation of the programme
  - to assess the outcomes of the programme.
5. This report focusses on the first aim, that is the issues associated with the process and implementation of SCC in PtS schools. Findings are based primarily on fieldwork undertaken in the PtS schools from May to July 2015. Where appropriate, reference is also made to analysis of data collected from surveys of pupils in Year 6, 7 and 9 over same period. A second wave of fieldwork will be undertaken from May to July 2016. A further report will be produced which will consider, in much greater depth, the outputs and outcomes associated with programme-related activity.

### **Findings from Year 1 of the programme**

6. This section considers the main findings from the evaluation of the first year of the programme.

#### *Understanding the needs of PtS schools*

7. Analysis of national administrative data sources reveals a relatively high level of variability amongst PtS schools. Synthesis of the analysis of national administrative data sources and qualitative feedback from stakeholders suggests that the approaches adopted by PtS schools are likely to be influenced by their trajectory prior to their inclusion in SCC, and, in particular, the performance of their school leaders.
8. Based on our analysis, we identified three different types of PtS schools.
- **Group A:** Schools in which the quality of provision appears to have been **diminishing** prior to engagement with SCC and were at risk of further decline. We assessed **8** of the 38 PtS schools visited as Group A schools.
  - **Group B:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared **stable** prior to engagement with SCC but was considered in need of

improvement. We assessed **16** of the 38 PtS schools visited as Group B schools.

- **Group C:** Schools in which the quality of provision had **started to improve** prior to engagement with SCC. We assessed **14** of the 38 PtS schools visited as Group C schools.

*Programme-level guidance and support*

9. In most cases, interviewees welcomed the opportunity afforded to PtS schools by their inclusion in SCC and the availability of additional support to help clusters overcome their barriers to improvement. That said, in most cases, interviewees reflected that work undertaken to date was not dissimilar to that which had been undertaken prior to the launch of SCC.
10. The majority of PtS schools indicated that they were working with other secondary partners. In such schools, a number of different types of partnership were evident. In particular, those developed with schools with *'areas of excellence'* to support the sharing of effective practice; collaborative work with other PtS schools that often focussed on developing responses to shared challenges; and collaborative arrangements with other local schools, commonly aimed at developing a shared response to local/regional developments.
11. Interviewees were broadly supportive of the concept of a *Single School* Development Plan and the desire to ensure that activities identified within a development plan were fully resourced. Interviewees invited the Welsh Government to consider whether further steps could be taken to support schools in developing their plans. In particular: resourcing the full plan, given discrepancies between the grant and development planning cycle; responding to both national and local priorities; and producing a single document that included enough information to be used in a school, while still being of a workable length.

*The support provided by Challenge Advisers*

12. Interviewees indicated that successful Advisers often adopted a number of common approaches.

- Striking an appropriate balance between **challenging ineffective practice** and **providing sufficient support** to enable Senior Leaders to improve.
- Demonstrating their **independence**. Interviewees valued the manner that their Adviser had sought to ensure that the voice of individual PtS schools was heard in discussions between their LA, Consortia and the Welsh Government.
- Maintaining a **strategic focus**. Effective Advisers were felt to ensure that schools would not lose sight of the *'big picture'*.

13. Advisers appear to have implemented three main models of practice, largely informed by the prior trajectory of PtS schools.

- **Model 1 – Focus on improving leadership and management:** Where Advisers identified the capacity of the existing Senior Leadership Team in a PtS school as the main barrier to improvement, Advisers had taken on a range of roles to stabilise the school until changes had been made in the team. Such roles required a level of engagement far in excess of what would be associated, normally, with an external Adviser.
- **Model 2 – Focus on school improvement planning:** In those schools that were perceived to be stable, but where Senior Leaders were thought to be in need of additional support if the school was to improve, Advisers were seen to adopt the role of a critical friend. They were commonly found to have focussed on supporting Senior Leaders to improve the quality of their self- evaluation infrastructure.
- **Model 3 – Expert support for school improvement planning:** In those schools that were perceived to have started to improve prior to inclusion in SCC, Advisers had often taken on a more limited role. In such cases, input was often restricted to meetings of the Accelerated Improvement Board. Senior Leaders often emphasised the



importance of their Adviser as an independent advocate for the school, particularly in dialogue with the Welsh Government and Consortia.

#### *The work of Accelerated Improvement Boards*

14. All but one of the 38 PtS schools we visited had a functional Accelerated Improvement Board (AIBs). Membership of each AIB comprised of the Headteacher of the PtS school, the school's Adviser, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Headteacher of a primary school within the PtS cluster.
15. In many schools, meetings were attended by other members of the Senior Leadership team and were perceived to have made a valuable contribution, not least in reducing the burden on their Headteacher. Interviewees considered the role of the Adviser to be crucial to setting the correct tone for the meetings and steering dialogue towards those issues that had the potential to have the greatest impact on school improvement. In some instances, it was noted that Advisers had led AIB meetings. In such cases it was widely felt that this had helped to ensure that the school moved forward. However, it was also acknowledged that taking a lead in this way had the potential to undermine the authority of the Senior Leadership Team.
16. Overall, interviewees were positive about the contribution of their AIB to supporting improvements within their schools. AIBs appear to have been most effective where schools already had appropriate school improvement processes in place. Where this was not the case it was felt that an AIB could lack direction. Some interviewees, particularly from schools that were perceived to have started to improve prior to inclusion in SCC, felt that the requirement for them to sustain an AIB was overly bureaucratic.

#### *Use of SCC funding*

17. The majority of school-based interviewees indicated that they felt that SCC funding had had a positive impact.

18. Feedback from interviewees revealed a number of common areas of expenditure:

- funding to support **targeted pupil interventions**
- funding to run **CPD courses for teachers**
- capital investment to improve the **school learning environment**
- funding to recruit **additional support staff**.

*Approaches adopted by PtS schools*

19. In seeking to overcome their barriers to improvement, PtS schools have sought to respond (albeit to a varying degree) to one of three key priorities:

- supporting improvements in the quality of **leadership and management**
- improving **pupil engagement**
- supporting improvements in the quality of **teaching and learning**.

20. Although PtS schools appear to have adopted a number of common approaches to overcome their barriers to improvement, in practice, the relative emphasis placed on each domain differed widely, not least due to the differing needs of each school.

*Identifying emerging impacts of participation in SCC on PtS schools*

21. At the time of our fieldwork (March-July 2015), interviewees were not able to quantify the effect of school improvement activity at their schools. Nonetheless, interviewees in the majority of PtS schools indicated that they felt engagement in SCC had had a positive impact.

*Next steps for the evaluation*

22. We will undertake a further wave of fieldwork in May-July 2016. This will support the production of a final report. The report will consider, in much greater depth, the output and outcomes associated with programme related activity.

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of research undertaken by SQW on behalf of the Welsh Government as part of the independent evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC). The report is based on fieldwork undertaken from May to July 2015 and includes illustrative findings from surveys undertaken with pupils in Year 6, 7 and 9 in the same period<sup>1</sup>. It focusses on issues associated with the process and implementation of SCC in Pathways to Success (PtS) schools. A second wave of fieldwork will be undertaken from May to July 2016, this will consider, in much greater depth, the output and outcomes associated with programme related activity.

### **Background**

- 1.2 Schools Challenge Cymru sits within a wider school improvement strategy for Wales, which includes major changes to qualifications, curriculum and assessment. In particular, the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Framework<sup>2</sup>; the introduction of national testing on literacy and numeracy in Years 2 to 9<sup>3</sup> and reforms to qualifications and the curriculum following the publication of Successful Futures by Professor Graham Donaldson (2015). Concurrently changes have been made to the supportive infrastructure around schools, for instance through the introduction of the National Model for Regional Working in February 2014 following the recommendations of the Hill review (2013) and because of work undertaken following the publication of Qualified for Life (2014).
- 1.3 Under the National Model, Local Authorities retain statutory accountability for school performance, together with responsibility for the exercise of statutory powers of intervention and organisation of schools. Supporting them, however, are four Regional Education Consortia (hereafter termed Consortia) working on behalf of the Local Authorities

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<sup>1</sup>Fieldwork took place in the second full-term following the launch of the programme.

<sup>2</sup>This was made statutory in September 2014.

<sup>3</sup>These diagnostic tests have been designed to provide a key source of pupil level data on progress in literacy and numeracy amongst young people from Key Stage 1 to 3.

to promote improved outcomes for children and young people (Welsh Government, 2014a). A central pillar of the regional working framework is the commitment that *every* school should be allocated a named Challenge Adviser. This role was created as a result of concern about the quality of existing System Leaders and their ability to provide the level of '*challenge*' required to deliver the necessary step-change in school improvement.

- 1.4 The framework also sets out the minimum amount of money that each Local Authority should contribute to the running of the Consortia, though each area has had the scope to achieve a different settlement. The schools in each Consortia area decide the extent to which they commission bespoke support from the Consortia (in addition to the support made available to schools by the Welsh Government).
- 1.5 Inclusion as a Pathways to Success school in Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC) provides for a more intensive level of support for schools that have been deemed as facing greater challenges, as set out below.

### **Introducing Schools Challenge Cymru**

- 1.6 Launched in June 2014, SCC represents a concerted effort on the part of the Welsh Government to respond to the variability in the performance of different schools across Wales in supporting the development of their pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In total, up to £20 million was made available during the first year to support the delivery of the programme. In addition to those resources made available to 40 Pathways to Success (PtS) schools and their wider clusters (each one commonly comprising of its feeder primary schools), funding has also been made available to Consortia to help build capacity within the wider education system. Initially identified by the Welsh Government in partnership with Consortia, support was targeted at those schools identified as underperforming and facing the greatest barriers to improvement. Drawing on learning from previous initiatives of this type, such as the London and Greater Manchester Challenges, PtS schools have been encouraged, through the programme, to reflect on the quality of their leadership and management, teaching and learning, and the

effectiveness of their work with the wider community. By making improvements in these areas, it is hoped that the SCC will support an improvement in pupil learning outcomes as well as learning the lessons from these developments in order to support the wider education system to improve. The programme includes a range of measures such as provision for external support and guidance to help participating schools more accurately assess the challenges that they face, and put in place a strategy capable of addressing these. The main elements of the programme are summarised below.

#### *Schools Challenge Cymru Advisers*

- 1.7 As part of the programme each PtS school has been assigned a Schools Challenge Cymru Adviser (hereafter termed an Adviser). Advisers are expected to take an active role in supporting their school's improvement processes. Recruited by the Welsh Government in partnership with Consortia, Advisers have been contracted to provide up to 25 days of professional support to each PtS school per annum.
- 1.8 Initially, following an open recruitment process, 12 Advisers were recruited. Depending on their existing professional commitments, Advisers were assigned differing numbers of PtS schools ranging, in the first year, from 2 to 8. Advisers were recruited on the basis of the ability to demonstrate *'an impressive track record of achieving school improvement and transforming education for children and young people'* (Welsh Government, 2014b, p6)<sup>4</sup>.
- 1.9 To provide an interface between Advisers and the Welsh Government each PtS school has also been allocated a named link officer. Additional support is also provided by a named member of the SCC Champions Group<sup>5</sup>. Monthly meetings, chaired by Professor Mel Ainscow (the Welsh Government's appointed champion for SCC), provide an

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<sup>4</sup>In practice Advisers have come from a range of backgrounds, with some having experience of working as a senior leader (although not always as a Headteacher) in Welsh Schools, while others had worked solely in England.

<sup>5</sup>The Champions Group, chaired by Professor Mel Ainscow comprises of Dewi Lake, Debbie Lewis, Sir Alasdair MacDonald and Alan Tudor Jones. The group is charged with monitoring the performance of the programme and ensuring that its impact is maximised.

opportunity for Advisers to share effective practice and discuss how the impact of the programme can be maximised. As part of their role in monitoring the performance of the programme, Champions are responsible for assuring the quality of the work of individual Advisers.

#### *Schools Challenge Cymru Funding*

- 1.10 Through the programme PtS schools have the opportunity to apply for additional funding to help them overcome their barriers to improvement. Mindful of the different challenges facing each PtS school, Senior Leaders in partnership with their Adviser and with support from their Champion have been required to submit applications on an annual basis. Each application must demonstrate how SCC funding will contribute to a school's overall development plan and add to (rather than duplicate) planned activity. No ceiling has been set for funding applications, although Senior Leaders are asked to consider the sustainability of any activities supported through the funding. Individual applications are signed off by the Welsh Government with funding paid out via the relevant Consortium. Responsibility for monitoring the expenditure of SCC funding sits, in the first instance, with the Accelerated Improvement Board in each school. Oversight over the appropriate payment of SCC funding is monitored by Consortia (each of whom have a designated SCC Link Officer).

#### *Accelerated Improvement Board*

- 1.11 As a condition of their participation in SCC, PtS schools are required to set up an Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB). Guidance from the Welsh Government suggests that the Board should meet monthly and should include representation from the Headteacher of the PtS school (who should, where appropriate, also chair the meeting), the school's Chair of Governors, a representative from the Local Authority, the designated Adviser, and a Headteacher from a primary school within the same school cluster. AIBs are designed to hold to account Senior Leaders in each PtS school for the implementation of their chosen

school improvement strategy and to ensure that any additional funding accessed through SCC is spent effectively (Welsh Government, 2014).

*(Single) School Development Plan*

1.12 Each PtS school is also charged (with support from their Adviser) with ensuring that their School Development Plan (SDP) was consistent with new guidance from the Welsh Government in advance of it becoming a compulsory requirement in September 2015. The guidance stipulates that the plan should provide a comprehensive articulation of how a school intends to overcome its barriers to improvement. In doing so, the plan is expected to identify the school's short and (sustainable) longer-term improvement priorities and targets, the approaches that will be taken to respond to these, and the basis on which the performance of the school will be assessed against anticipated outcomes. The activities proposed in the plan should also be costed (ideally with reference to what source of funding will be used to support them).

**Evaluation aims and design**

1.13 The evaluation has two overarching aims:

- to consider the implementation of the programme
- to assess the outcomes of the programme.

1.14 The Welsh Government, through the study, aims to understand the effect of the approach adopted through SCC to supporting PtS schools and in particular the extent to which the support provided to individual schools helped them to overcome their barriers to improvement. As set out in the programme-level guidance produced by the Welsh Government (2014b), key foci are:

- **leadership and management**, including strategies adopted to improve the skills and competencies of Senior Leaders and changes in processes and procedures
- **teaching and learning**, including techniques used to identify and support improvements in subject knowledge and pedagogical practice, and support more effective use of formative and summative assessment

- **work with the wider community** including local primary schools to reduce the impact of transition on pupils moving from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 and ensuring the effective engagement of pupils throughout their time in formal education.

1.15 Such a remit has had a number of implications for the design of the evaluation. Not least the need to adapt to the multi-faceted nature of the programme, and the fact that depending on the approach adopted by individual PtS schools, beneficiaries of programme activity could include teachers, pupils and parents affiliated to a PtS school but also other local partners.

#### *Research Design*

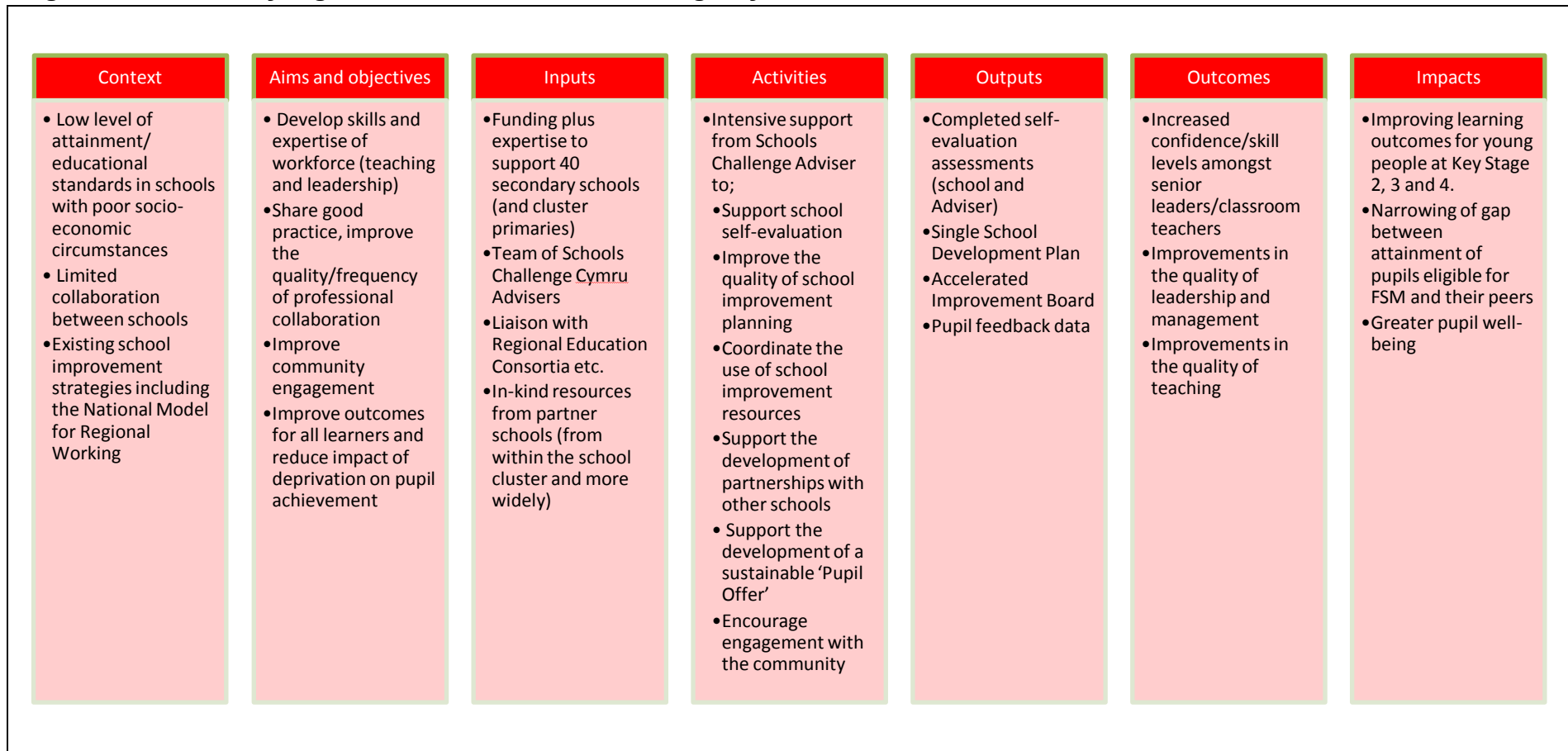
1.16 The research design was finalised following a scoping study. This included a series of strategic interviews with the central Welsh Government policy team and a range of other pertinent stakeholders, and a documentary review, in order to understand the concepts, policies and strategies that have underpinned the design and launch of the programme. These activities supported the construction of an overarching logic model for the study. As set out in Figure 1.1, this model summarises:

- the **underlying theories of change** for SCC (including that access to a bespoke programme of support within a common framework will help identify barriers to progress in PtS schools and support improvements in leadership and management, teaching and learning and community engagement)
- the policy and practice **assumptions** underlying the intervention (underpinning the level of success of the SCC are a number of assumptions, including the capacity of PtS schools to work effectively with cluster primaries)
- the various **inputs** arising from the introduction of SCC (including access to support from an Adviser and the opportunity to apply for additional funding)
- the expected relationship between the inputs and the anticipated **outputs**, such as way(s) that SCC funding has been used



- the **anticipated outcomes** (both short- and long-term), which might include improvements in the quality of leadership and management in PtS schools, in the quality of teaching and learning, and in terms of pupil engagement
- the projected **impact** of the interventions, which, at the outset, were expected to include an improvement in pupil learning outcomes at Key Stage 4 (in particular the proportion of young people attaining Level 2 Inclusive) and a reduction in the gap between the performance of pupils eligible for free school means and their peers - more recently, the Welsh Government has also looked to support an improvement in pupil learning outcomes at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

**Figure 1.1: Summary logic model for Schools Challenge Cymru**



Source: SQW

## *Sources of evidence*

1.17 The data in this study was drawn from:

- desk-based reviews of publicly available and SCC specific documentation, including completed self-evaluation forms, Single SDPs and Adviser reports - a total of 217 documents were reviewed
- a series of scoping interviews with the key personnel associated with SCC (from the policy team, the Consortia and members of the SCC Champions Group) - a total of 11 interviews were conducted
- secondary analysis of data available from the StatsWales site and from individual school websites to map the starting points for each of the 40<sup>6</sup> PtS schools
- consultations with all 12 SCC Challenge Advisers
- visits to 38 of the 39 PtS clusters - a total of 250 interviews were completed over the course of the visits including:
  - head teachers/Senior Leaders and other staff in PtS schools and their cluster primary schools
  - members of functioning AIBs (including local authority representatives)
  - school governors
- online and paper surveys of pupils
  - 802 Year 6 pupils in 28 cluster primary schools
  - 1,526 Year 7 pupils and 1,590 Year 9 pupils in 19 secondary (PtS) schools

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<sup>6</sup>Following the launch of the programme a merger occurred between Glyn Derw High School and Michaelston Community College which led to the creation of the Glyn Derw and Michaelston Federation. Although administratively, each school remains a separate entity, evidence gathered during our visit indicated a high degree of crossover in staffing with practitioners working on both sites. As such for analytical purposes, we have considered Glyn Derw High School and Michaelston Community College as one case study site.

- over four-fifths of the respondents (3,161) completed the survey online, with 757 (19%) completing it on paper.

### *Report Structure*

1.18 The rest of the report is structured as follows.

- **Section 2: Understanding the needs of PtS schools:** In this section we consider the challenges faced by PtS schools in overcoming their barriers to improvement. We also consider whether the approaches adopted by PtS schools may be best understood with reference to their prior improvement trajectory.
- **Section 3: Programme-level guidance and support for PtS schools:** This section considers the extent to which programme-level guidance from the Welsh Government has influenced the approach of PtS schools.
- **Section 4: The support provided by Schools Challenge Cymru Advisers:** In this section we consider the contribution of Advisers in supporting improvements in PtS schools. We also reflect on the strategies adopted by Advisers to engage Senior Leaders and the attributes of successful Advisers in delivering their role.
- **Section 5: The work of Accelerated Improvement Boards:** This section examines the response of PtS schools to the requirement to set-up an AIB. We also consider the perceived role and contribution of AIB members in supporting PtS schools to overcome their barriers to improvement.
- **Section 6: Use of SCC funding:** In this section we reflect on the ways that PtS schools have used SCC funding. We also explore the perceived suitability of the policies and procedures put in place by the Welsh Government to support the paying out of funding and assess the contribution of SCC funding in helping PtS schools to overcome their barriers to improvement.
- **Section 7: Approaches adopted by PtS schools:** This section considers the approaches adopted by PtS schools to meet their school improvement objectives and moves towards a framework for understanding the different approaches taken by different schools.

- **Section 8: Identifying emerging impacts of participation in Schools Challenge Cymru on PtS schools and next steps for the evaluation:** In this section we reflect on the approaches taken by PtS schools to assess their progress in meeting their school improvement objectives, consider what evidence is available at this stage to support an assessment of the impact of the programme. We also reflect on the implications of our findings for the ongoing evaluation.

## 2 Understanding the needs of PtS schools

2.1 In this section, we examine the characteristics and historic performance of those schools selected for inclusion within SCC as a Pathways to Success (PtS) school. By acknowledging both the commonalities and differences between individual schools, we reflect on the likely consequences of these for the delivery of the programme and the evaluation. We also explore the potential explanatory power of looking at the PtS schools with reference to their historic performance and to insights gained during the qualitative fieldwork on their development trajectories. Where appropriate, we use this exploratory grouping as an evaluative lens through which to consider differences in the approaches that they have adopted, and to examine the performance of different PtS schools over the duration of the intervention.

### Understanding the historic performance of PtS schools

- 2.2 The Welsh Government recognised that, whilst the programme should be targeted at the most '*challenged*' schools in Wales, different schools were likely to face '*different challenges*' (Welsh Government, 2014b). To reflect this, they used a variety of indicators to create a challenge index. Drawing on a three-year average, school performance data was used to identify a long list of schools, from which the final 40 were selected in consultation with Consortia<sup>7</sup>.
- 2.3 Even within the 40 PtS schools there is a relatively high level of variability across a number of performance indicators, with some schools appearing to be performing better on some national indicators than others. In 2014, for example, the highest proportion of pupils achieving Level 2 Inclusive at Key Stage 4 (L2I) at a PtS school stood at 70.7%, with the national mean at 55.4%. However, at the other end of the scale, the lowest proportion of pupils achieving this benchmark at a PtS school stood at 21.5%, a difference of 49.2 percentage points and 33.9 percentage points lower than the national mean. Levels of socio-

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<sup>7</sup> At the time when this report was compiled, we had visited 38 of these 39 schools.

economic deprivation were also found to be similarly varied. In 2014, when the national average of pupils eligible for free school meals stood at 17.5%, the most deprived PtS school had 43.0% of pupils eligible for free school meals, while 11.4% of pupils (6.1 percentage points fewer than the national mean) were eligible in the least deprived PtS school (Welsh Government, 2016b).

- 2.4 While such data is clearly important in framing any discussion of the level of challenge facing these schools, it tells us little about the approach adopted by different schools to identify and overcome their barriers to improvement, or their relative success in this prior to their inclusion in SCC. For this, it is important to gain a much more holistic assessment of the school, synthesising quantitative and qualitative data from key stakeholders.
- 2.5 When asked to reflect on the challenges they faced, interviewees in many of the PtS schools we visited (35 of the 38) indicated that, in the past, they had struggled to overcome the barriers posed by high levels of socio-economic deprivation within their catchment area. This was commonly felt to contribute to low levels of pupil and parental engagement. In seeking to mitigate these challenges, interviewees indicated that there was no *'one size fits all solution'* (Adviser). As argued by one Headteacher in a rural PtS school, one of the main challenges facing their school was how to improve pupil attendance. To do so required the school to first overcome the challenges posed by the rurality of the school and the lack of regular public transport. He noted that, in many cases, if a pupil missed the school bus in the morning, there was no other way that they would be able to get to school that day. In another school, where pupil attendance was also considered to be a challenge, the Headteacher indicated the reasons for this lay not in the location of the school (it was in an urban catchment area), but in the demographics of the local community. The main issue, he noted, was in developing effective relationships with the large number of pupils from the Traveller community who were enrolled at the school.
- 2.6 While many interviewees in the PtS schools (and their cluster primaries) indicated that responding to such contextual challenges was an

important part of school improvement planning, they also acknowledged that the effectiveness of this planning depended on improvements in the schools' leadership and management. Indeed, the majority of staff in over three-quarters of the PtS schools we visited (29 of the 38) felt that this was one of the primary barriers to improvement.

- 2.7 However, interviewees also indicated that their schools were at very different stages in their response to this challenge of improving leadership. In just under a fifth of the PtS schools we visited it was noted that, over the course of the academic year *prior* to their inclusion in SCC, there had been major changes in the Senior Leadership Team at the school. In such schools the emphasis was on providing new leaders the space and time to identify and then deliver (an appropriate) improvement programme. In other schools, where the Senior Leadership Team had been in place for a couple of years or more, it was evident that, in most cases a blueprint for improvement was already in place and the focus was on putting this into practice.

### **Moving towards a system for understanding progress in PtS schools**

- 2.8 Mindful of the variability witnessed in the level of challenge faced by different PtS schools, we suggest that, to develop an understanding of the nature of the approach adopted by these schools it might be helpful to consider the schools according to their trajectory *prior* to the implementation of SCC. Based on an analysis of administrative data<sup>8</sup> and performance information gathered during our qualitative fieldwork in 38 of the 39 PtS schools, we identified three different groups of schools.
- **Group A:** Schools in which the quality of provision appears to have been **diminishing** prior to engagement with SCC and were at risk of further decline.

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<sup>8</sup>Key contextual indications included; the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, levels of attainment at Key Stage 4 and inspection reports produced by Estyn.

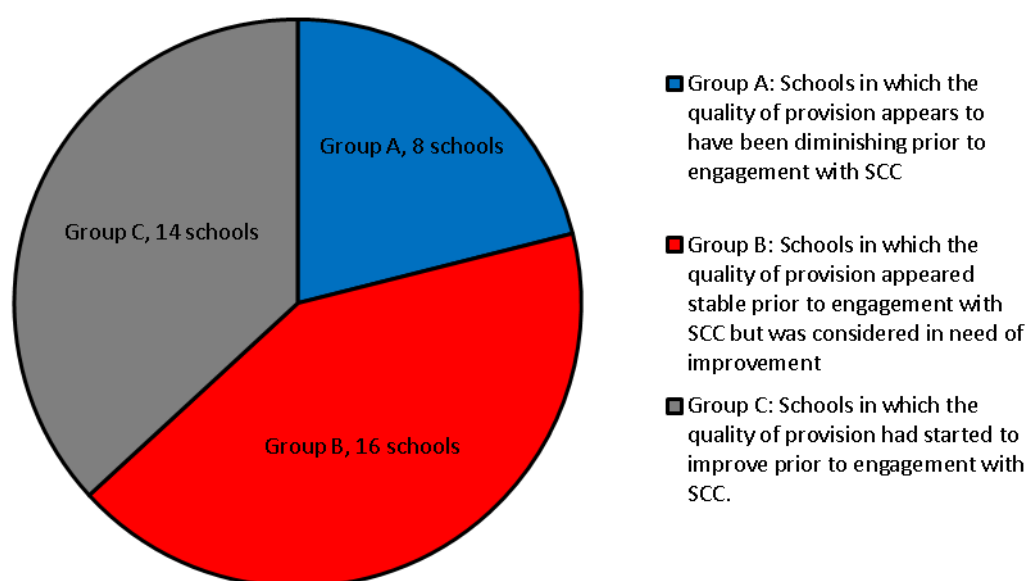


- **Group B:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared **stable** prior to engagement with SCC but was considered in need of improvement.
- **Group C:** Schools in which the quality of provision had **started to improve** prior to engagement with SCC.

2.9 In using this approach, it is important to recognise the methodological limitations by which schools have been grouped, particularly the fact that the primary source of intelligence has come from interviews with key stakeholders. Nonetheless, we feel that such an approach offers the most accurate assessment of the stage the majority of relevant stakeholders considered each PtS School to be prior to inclusion. In doing so, we also acknowledge the limitations of administrative data alone and the inevitable time lag before any changes in the quality of provision could begin to translate into an improvement in pupil learning outcomes. Inevitably, in seeking to put in place a grouping of this type, there will always be those schools that do not fit neatly into one group or another. In such instances, we have augmented our information with reference to publicly available sources, such as Estyn data and recent pupil performance information, to 'sense-check' the views of those stakeholders to whom we spoke. Grouping schools in this way has provided a means by which to understand and interpret differences in the approaches adopted by different schools.

2.10 The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 2-1. In summary a total of 8 schools were perceived to be at risk of continuing to decline even following to inclusion in SCC. A further 16 of the 38 PtS schools were widely regarded as stable prior to inclusion within the programme, but in need of marked improvement. The remaining 14 schools were perceived to have started improving prior to engaging with SCC, even though there were areas in which additional support might be needed.

**Figure 2.1: Grouping Pathways to Success schools**



Source: SQW

2.11 The explanatory power of this conceptual framework is perhaps best demonstrated through a consideration of the apparent differences in the prioritisation of leadership and management by interviewees in different PtS schools, and the approaches adopted by schools in response to the challenges they faced in this regard. As summarised in paragraph 2.6, the majority of staff in 29 of the 38 PtS schools we visited indicated that the quality of leadership and management at their school was one of their primary barriers to improvement. However, amongst those schools perceived to be in Group C (that is, those who had started improving prior to inclusion in SCC) interviewees in only one half of these (7 of the 14) indicated that leadership and management was one of their primary concerns. In such schools, the primary barrier to improvement was much more commonly perceived to be the **quality of teaching**. Conversely, in just under two-thirds of Group A schools (5 of the 8), interviewees indicated that improving the quality of leadership and management was their primary concern.

- 2.12 Such differences in overall prioritisation were also found to have considerable implications for the type of approaches to improvement adopted by different schools. For example, in 5 of the 14 Group C schools we visited (schools that were commonly perceived to have started to improve prior to their inclusion in the programme), interviewees indicated that they felt one of the major strengths of the school was the skills and expertise of the Headteacher. In these schools, the emphasis was on building wider leadership capacity throughout the school, particularly amongst middle leaders (such as Department or Faculty Heads). In Group A schools (those schools commonly perceived as facing the highest barriers to improvement), in contrast, interviewees commonly reflected that the strength of the Senior Leadership Team was a matter of concern and that work was ongoing to build the skills of this group to support the development and delivery of an appropriate school improvement strategy.
- 2.13 This approach to classifying PtS schools also finds support, however tentatively, in our analysis of the results of the ‘You and Your School’ survey. The survey was administered to pupils in Year 7 and/or Year 9 in 19 of the 39 PtS schools<sup>9</sup>. It explored how pupils perceived their learning environment and the support they received from their teachers and their parents. It also considered their school’s impact on their views of (and aspirations for) their progression in learning. Analysis of the survey results found significant differences in the views of pupils in the three different types of schools<sup>10</sup>. For instance, pupils in those schools commonly perceived as facing the highest barriers to improvement (Group A schools) were significantly less likely than their peers to indicate that they took part in a wide range of different activities at school (including sports and performance art). Such pupils also indicated that, while supportive, their teachers used a more limited range of teaching strategies than pupils saw amongst teachers in either Group B or Group

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<sup>9</sup>All 39 PtS schools were asked whether they would be willing to support the administration of the survey. Nineteen schools were able to do so.

<sup>10</sup>For further information on the ‘You and Your School’ survey, please see Annex A.

C schools. The range of different teaching strategies reported by pupils as being in use on a regular (often daily) basis was significantly higher in the schools that were commonly perceived to have started to improve prior to their inclusion in the programme (Group C schools).

- 2.14 Strikingly, differences in the types of learning opportunities offered to pupils in different PtS schools were matched by evidence of varying levels of engagement. For instance, higher levels of truancy and lateness were reported by pupils in Group A schools, though (admittedly) they tended to report higher levels of both amongst their friends rather than as something they themselves took part in. Pupils in these schools also expressed lower levels of engagement with their school (though not with their peers, with whom they generally felt happy) than responding pupils in other schools. Caution should be exercised in considering these findings, given the limited number of PtS schools who took part<sup>11</sup>. However, they provide some insights into possible experiential and behavioural differences amongst pupils which, in turn, may have implications for their longer-term outcomes. Poor attendance, for example, is acknowledged as a strong contributory factor to lower attainment outcomes (see Morris and Rutt, 2005).
- 2.15 Given the level of variability observed in PtS schools, it is important to reflect on the implications of this for the evaluation. Although the framework set out above is not designed to explain the performance of PtS schools, it provides a conceptual framework through which to understand and ultimately test the effectiveness of the approaches adopted by PtS schools.
- 2.16 In recognising that the aims/objectives of different PtS schools may be demonstrably different, it will also be important to consider the extent to which it is meaningful to assess the effectiveness of the programme via programme-wide measures. Even where schools examine their performance using similar measures (such as the proportion of pupils at

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<sup>11</sup>Nineteen PtS schools took part. Responses were obtained for 3,016 young people. For further information on the 'You and Your School' survey, please see Annex A.

Level 2 Inclusive), differences in their historic performance trajectory make any direct comparison of outcomes achieved unwise.

### **Section Summary: Understanding the needs of PtS schools**

#### **Understanding the historic performance of PtS schools**

- Analysis of national administrative data sources reveals a relatively high level of variability amongst PtS schools across a number of performance and contextual indicators, including the proportion of pupils who, historically, achieved L2I.
- To understand the **different** challenges facing PtS schools in overcoming their barriers to improvement it is important to make a more holistic assessment of the school, taking on board the views of key stakeholders.

#### **Moving towards a system for understanding progress in PtS schools**

- Synthesis of the analysis of national administrative data sources and qualitative feedback from stakeholders suggests that the approaches adopted by PtS schools are likely to be influenced by their trajectory prior to inclusion in SCC, and in particular the performance of their school leaders.
- Based on our analysis, we have identified three different types of PtS schools.
  - **Group A:** Schools in which the quality of provision appears to have been **diminishing** prior to engagement with SCC. We assessed **8** of the 38 PtS schools we visited as Group A schools.
  - **Group B:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared **stable** prior to engagement with SCC but was considered in need of improvement. We assessed **16** of the 38 PtS schools we visited as Group B schools.
  - **Group C:** Schools in which the quality of provision had **started to improve** prior to engagement with SCC. We assessed **14** of the 38 PtS schools we visited as Group C schools.

### 3 Programme-level guidance and support for PtS schools

3.1 In this section, we reflect on the extent to which guidance has affected the ways in which PtS schools have identified and responded to their barriers to improvement. Key areas that we consider include:

- the information and guidance issued by the Welsh Government discussing the aims and objectives of the programme
- the guidance produced by the Welsh Government to support the production of '(Single) School Development Plans' ((S)SDPs)
- the guidance produced by the Welsh Government to support the introduction of the 'Pupil' Offer.

#### Programme-level guidance

3.2 Over the course of the first year of the programme, interviewees indicated that the quality of information and guidance produced by the Welsh Government to support PtS schools (and the wider cluster) had improved. Many, though, were critical of the way in which the purpose of the programme had been communicated externally. Despite the efforts of the Welsh Government to redress public misperceptions, interviewees frequently referenced the wider community concept of them as being part of the '*naughty forty*'. It was noted that the media had used this term to describe the PtS schools following the launch of programme.

3.3 In most cases, Senior Leaders appeared to have moved past this initial characterisation, but a number noted that it had proved a barrier to getting the rest of the staff team on-board. In schools faced with a falling school roll, a number of Headteachers indicated that it was seen locally as '*one more reason for a parent to send their child somewhere else*' (Headteacher, PtS school). However, as it had become clearer that PtS schools and schools in their wider cluster would benefit from additional support, in particular access to new funding, school-based interviewees indicated that they had found it easier to talk about the programme as '*an opportunity rather than a punishment*' (Senior Leader, PtS School).

3.4 With the opportunity to access additional support, a number of interviewees reflected on the responsibility placed on those involved in supporting PtS schools to ensure that, over the life of the programme, there was a demonstrable improvement in pupil outcomes. While such a focus on outcomes was broadly welcomed, there was concern around the extent to which it was reasonable to expect that such an outcome would be achieved over the relatively short timescale over which the programme was to be delivered. They emphasised that this was particularly the case if the correct emphasis was to be placed on ensuring that PtS schools were placed on a sustainable improvement trajectory. A number of the interviewees we spoke to, particularly those working with or in Group A schools (those schools facing some of the greatest challenges), noted that they had spent the first year putting in place the building blocks for a functional learning environment. If successful, this would place the school on a stable trajectory, but much more work would be required to get the school to a place where it had made all the improvements required of it.

#### *Cluster working*

3.5 Through the programme, the Welsh Government has encouraged PtS schools to work with their wider cluster (commonly made up of their primary feeder schools). It is hoped that improved cluster working will ensure that the benefits of SCC are shared across the wider education landscape. In engaging with cluster primaries, PtS schools have been encouraged to reflect on what more they can do to support improved learning outcomes at Key Stage 2 and to reduce any negative impact of the transition of pupils from Year 6 into Year 7. As might be expected, there was evidence of cluster working in the majority (just over two-thirds) of the PtS schools visited. However, in most cases interviewees reflected that the work undertaken in Year 1 of the programme (2014/15) was little different to that which had happened in the past. For example, many of the cluster schools we visited already had arrangements in place to allow Year 6 pupils to visit the PtS secondary school and meet the Year 7 teachers to ensure they were familiar with the environment.

As this indicates, the emphasis of activity remained firmly on mitigating the emotional or social impact of the transition, rather than on improving pupil learning outcomes.

3.6 Amongst many interviewees there was an ambition to do more in the second year of the programme. As summed up by one Headteacher, although '*such [transition] work is important, it should be the starting point*' (Headteacher, Cluster Primary). In clusters sharing this view, there was found to be growing interest in exploring opportunities to '*improve the continuity of learning*' (Headteacher, Cluster Primary). In clusters that had taken forward a programme of work with this aim, a number of common elements were identifiable:

- **The moderation of Teacher Assessments at Key Stage 2:**

Although interviewees reflected that clusters (including representatives from the appropriate secondary school) had historically come together to support the moderation of teacher assessments at Key Stage 2, in a number of cases inclusion in SCC had led this to become a much greater priority. For example, where in the past moderation work would have been undertaken by Transition Coordinators, this year meetings had been attended by the Headteacher (or at least a member of the Senior Leadership Team) of each school. Interviewees commented that, with much greater buy-in from both phases, the meetings had been much more effective in challenging perceived discontinuities between the performance of pupils at the end of Year 6 and on entry into Year 7.

- **CPD opportunities:** In seven clusters, interviewees indicated that, over the course of the last year, there had been an increase in the number of CPD or other training opportunities open to practitioners in both phases. In most cases, these sought to leverage the subject-knowledge of secondary practitioners in sharing their expertise with their primary colleagues. However, in a small number of cases, it was felt that secondary practitioners would also benefit from greater awareness of the pedagogical approaches used by primary



colleagues and, in these clusters, the emphasis had been placed on the provision of joint-training events.

- **Work to align pedagogical practices in Year 6 and Year 7:** In a small number of clusters, interviewees indicated that over the course of the last year, they had explored what could be done to align the pedagogical approaches adopted by practitioners in Year 6 and Year 7 more closely. As noted by one Headteacher [at the moment] *when a pupil enters Year 7, we expect them to take off from where they left off before the summer yet expect them to learn in a different way*' (Headteacher, Cluster Primary). In such clusters, work had focussed around changing the way that secondary practitioners approached teaching Year 7 pupils to provide a more familiar experience of learning. It was hoped that by providing for a more graduated transition between the pedagogical approaches used by primary and secondary practitioners respectively, pupils would find it easier to progress in the initial stages of Key Stage 3.

3.7 In just under a third of the schools visited, interviewees indicated that, in the past, cluster working had not been prioritised. A number of factors were felt to have contributed to this, most commonly instability at PtS schools which meant that Senior Leaders had focussed their energies on school improvement work within their school. A few of the Senior Leaders also noted that developing strong relationships with other schools within the cluster was challenging due to volatility in the destinations of Year 6 pupils. As noted by one PtS Headteacher *'pupils commonly come to the school from 15-20 different [feeder schools]'* (Headteacher, PtS school). It was felt that this made judging which schools to offer transition activities extremely difficult. Nonetheless, interviewees from PtS schools and the wider cluster indicated that they would be looking to use the additional resources made available through SCC to promote a programme of cross-phase activity in Year 2 of the challenge.

### *Work with secondary partners*

- 3.8 In order to help PtS schools meet their school improvement objectives, the Welsh Government has encouraged them to consider, where appropriate, opportunities to develop partnerships with other secondary schools (both those located in Wales and more broadly). Given ongoing work at a national and regional level to improve the quality of school-to-school collaboration, for instance through the School Effectiveness Grant (and latterly the Educational Improvement Grant) and the National Literacy and Numeracy Programmes, it was noticeable that the majority (three-fifths) of PtS schools indicated that they were presently working with other secondary schools. Even so, there were a considerable number of PtS schools (15) that did not yet appear to have engaged in this type of activity at the time of our visit (June-July 2015).
- 3.9 While it is clearly important to understand the reasons why Senior Leaders have not sought to cultivate partnerships with other secondary schools, it is also important to reflect on whether school-to-school partnerships (managed by Senior Leaders) are necessarily more or less effective than those developed lower down in the school by a Department/Faculty head or by individual practitioners. Indeed, even in those PtS schools in which Senior Leaders indicated that there were no established school-to-school partnerships, that does not mean that there were no Department-level or practitioner-led relationships (of which Senior Leaders may have been unaware).
- 3.10 Such a viewpoint is reinforced by feedback from Senior Leaders in those schools in which no formal school-to-school partnership arrangements were in place. In a number of instances, Senior Leaders disputed whether investing management time in such arrangements was appropriate or whether relationships should be developed on a more *ad hoc* basis based on the needs of their school. Such views were encapsulated by the views of one Headteacher who reflected that it was more effective to empower their staff '*to follow their nose*' in their subject area than to always lead from the front.

3.11 That is not to say that all such schools were working in this way. Indeed, in some, it appeared that little, if any, partnership-working had taken place. In such schools, in line with the findings of previous research in this area (for example see Muijs D et al, 2011) it appeared that the main reason for this was the attitude of the Senior Leadership Team. Although interviewees argued that an inward-looking culture had often developed at a time where the school was perceived to be performing well (and so felt no need to work with other schools), subsequent volatility had then led *'such insularity to become entrenched'* (Headteacher, PtS school). As a senior leader in one such school noted: *'the old Head never left the school, so I never thought to do so myself. It is seductive to think that your school is unique and the challenges you face can be solved by you alone'* (Senior Leader, PtS School). In such schools, it was noticeable that Advisers had worked hard to try and promote collaborative opportunities and, in most cases, there was some evidence that the school was looking to develop relationships with other secondary schools over the course of the next academic year (2016/17). There were some schools, however, who continued to dismiss such opportunities. Moving forward, the Welsh Government may wish to reflect on what more can be done to encourage PtS schools to become more collaborative under the SCC programme.

3.12 In those PtS schools that appeared to be engaged in collaborative working, inclusion in the SCC had been seen (in most cases) as a chance to build on existing links as well as to identify new opportunities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, consistent with the work of Hadfield (2007) and others, PtS schools were found to have developed a range of different types of collaborative relationships, often for different purposes. Nonetheless, reflecting on the schools selected as partners by PtS schools illustrates a number of different types of relationship.

- **Schools with 'areas of excellence':** Interviewees in 11 PtS schools with partners indicated that they had looked to develop relationships with schools who were perceived to have an area of expertise from which they could benefit. For instance, a number had chosen to send senior/middle leaders at their PtS schools to training courses run by

schools who were believed to have exhibited particular strengths in leadership and management. In other cases, middle leaders had visited schools to better understand their approach to a particular curriculum area, such as mathematics.

- **Other PtS schools:** Just under a third of PtS schools who were engaged in collaborative working were working with other PtS schools. In many cases, this relationship pre-dated their inclusion in SCC, and interviewees indicated that the relationship had been invaluable in shaping a shared response to their barriers to improvement and to maximise the opportunity presented by their inclusion in the programme. Senior Leaders in two such schools, for instance, had identified a shared challenge around the collection and use of performance management information. Joint-working had culminated in both schools making similar changes to the make-up and role of the Middle Leadership Team.
- **Local schools:** Interviewees in five PtS schools indicated that their school had sought to engage with other local secondary schools. In most cases, such relationships were based on a recognition that such schools, due to their geographical proximity, faced similar challenges. Where partner schools were based in the same Local Authority/Consortium area, interviewees commonly reflected on the advantages of being able to develop a shared response to issues arising at a local/regional level.

3.13 When asked to comment on the perceived effectiveness (to date) of different approaches to collaborative working, none of the interviewees indicated that one approach was inherently more or less valuable than any other. Indeed, most felt that different approaches were appropriate at different stages of a school's improvement journey and fulfilled different and equally valid purposes. However, over the course of our visits it was evident that, to be effective, each type of relationship depended on a number of factors:

- A **shared understanding of the aims/objectives** of the partnership. Where partnerships had been effective, it was evident that there had been sufficient investment at the outset to ensure that all those engaged in any collaborative activity were clear what they could expect from partners and what, in turn, partners could expect from them. Indeed, as noted by Huxham and Vangen (2000), setting a small number of shared goals at the outset, is a really helpful way of ensuring that collaborative relationships are sustained. As noted by one Headteacher; *'to work, a partnership needs to be mutually beneficial - schools don't have a lot of capacity so they need to invest their time wisely'* (Headteacher, PtS school).
- The provision of **sufficient capacity to manage the relationship**. As summarised by one Headteacher, the cornerstone of any effective relationship is *'trust'*. However, interviewees argued that developing trusting relationships takes time and effort on behalf of both parties. Consistent with the findings of recent work by Muijs (2015), developing a trusting relationship was felt to be particularly important where one school was providing, and one school receiving, support. It was noted that such a dynamic was only effective where practitioners in receipt of support felt confident to open up their practice to scrutiny. Without this level of openness, the quality of advice had the potential to be superficial (responding to those needs accepted by the practitioner rather than those identified from a holistic assessment of the quality of their practice) and so fail to help address the underlying barriers to improvement.
- A **shared language** for improvement. Interviewees, on the whole, welcomed the opportunity to engage with schools/practitioners who were considered to be 'excellent' in one or more areas. It was recognised, however, that in looking to learn from another school, it was important to reflect on *'exportability'*. As noted by one Headteacher, while some strategies for engaging pupils in after-school activities may be appropriate for a school in central London, (where pupils had access to good public transport links) they might

not work in a rural area such as the Brecon Beacons (where access to public transport was much more limited). Some interviewees also queried whether, just because a practitioner might have been shown to be delivering the curriculum in an effective way that meant that they had the skills to support other practitioners to improve the quality of their own teaching. One Headteacher remarked that there had been value in sending their Middle Leadership Team to visit their partner school as this *'had been a real eye-opener for some [of them] who had started to realise how far behind they were'* (Headteacher, PtS School). He queried whether, in fact, the opportunity to capitalise on this had been missed as middle leaders at the partner school tasked with delivering the support *'had not been able to provide sufficient scaffolding to bridge the gap between what... [middle leaders at the PtS School]... had seen and where they were [in their own practice].'* (Headteacher, PtS School).

### **(Single) School Development Plans**

- 3.14 Over the course of our visits, awareness of guidance surrounding the requirement of schools to produce a (Single) School Development Plan ((S)SDP) by September 2015 amongst Headteachers and other Senior Leaders in PtS schools was high. Just over three-quarters of the PtS schools we visited indicated that they either had an (S)SDP in place or were in the process of producing one (commonly with an expectation that this would be finalised by the end of the school year – 2014/15). Further to this, there appeared to be broad support for the concept, namely in ensuring that the activities identified in a (S)SDP were fully resourced and that progress against school improvement objectives were measurable. As noted by one Headteacher *'it is what all good schools have been doing anyway'* (Headteacher, PtS School).
- 3.15 In practice, PtS schools appeared to be facing a number of challenges in producing a plan that met these criteria and their own needs.
- **Resourcing the full planning cycle:** Interviewees in the schools we visited were supportive of the Welsh Government's efforts to ensure that the activities set out in development plans were fully resourced.

However, interviewees commented that a discrepancy between the timing of the school planning cycle (commonly developed on the basis of a three-year cycle) and those of the grants available to schools (most of which are annualised) made it extremely difficult to resource development plans in the manner that might have been initially envisaged by the Welsh Government. Under such circumstances, interviewees also indicated that it was difficult to set meaningful targets.

- **Responding to national priorities:** In most cases there appeared to be evidence within existing planning documents that PtS schools had made an effort to respond to national priorities. Their plans included a desire to support improvements in the quality of teaching of literacy and numeracy and also recognised the importance of having a strategy in place to support work within the community. However, in a few cases, and particularly in the most challenged schools (Group A schools), interviewees (and in particular some Advisers) queried whether the obligation on schools to report against national priorities had the potential to distract them from addressing those issues that might make the most difference (such as the need to improve their self-evaluation planning).
- **Producing a ‘living’ document:** The majority of the interviewees we spoke to welcomed the ambition of the Welsh Government to reduce the burden on schools and to encourage the production of one ‘*single*’ development plan document. In practice, PtS schools appeared to be finding it difficult to produce a coherent document that successfully brought together different grant spending plans including that produced for SCC, a post-inspection plan and individual department plans (often developed by Senior Leaders within a school). As a result, there was some evidence that, while an (S)SDP had been produced, and progress against this was reviewed on a regular basis, in practice, implementation of the plan was governed by one or more additional planning documents (in some cases led by other members of the Senior Leadership Team). As noted by one

Headteacher 'to keep the Single Plan as a manageable document, the description of individual activities is necessarily brief. Such information is insufficient to support staff in delivering the plan, so we have had to develop other plans to support this' (Headteacher PtS School).

### **Pupil Offer**

- 3.16 Awareness of the 'Pupil Offer' amongst school-based interviewees in PtS schools was limited. When asked what funding had been accessed by the school following inclusion in SCC, the 'Pupil Offer' was identified by school-based interviewees in just over two-fifths of those we visited (16 of 38). Amongst those interviewees who were aware that their school had accessed this funding pot, the majority welcomed the Welsh Government's interest in issues relating to pupil engagement and aspiration. There was widespread acceptance and support for improving the range of opportunities available to pupils at PtS schools. Nonetheless, there appeared to be confusion amongst some interviewees over the purpose of the grant offered by the Welsh Government to support schools in this regard. For example, a number of interviewees queried the extent to which £5,000 would be sufficient to combat the entrenched disadvantage evident in their community. In reality, Welsh Government officials indicated that the grant had only ever been designed to provide seed-funding to allow schools to trial new/different approaches.
- 3.17 Interviewees commented that funding for the Pupil Offer had been used most effectively where it had been integrated into planned activities, scheduled as part of the *existing* SDP. In one school, where the 2015 funding had been used (in part) to pay for some pupils to visit the House of Commons and meet their Member of Parliament, the Headteacher indicated that, in the coming year, they were hoping to use the funds (combined with funding from other sources) to reach more pupils on a more regular basis. Although interviewees indicated that those that had gone on the trip had really benefited from the opportunity, it was felt that investing in a Welsh Rugby Union Development Officer to deliver after-



school activities *every week* in term-time would ensure that the funding supported a much wider cross-section of the community (including pupils from local primary schools).

## Section Summary: Programme-level guidance and support for PtS schools

### Response to programme-level guidance

- In most cases, interviewees welcomed the opportunity afforded to PtS schools by their inclusion in SCC and the availability of additional support to help clusters overcome their barriers to improvement.
- There was evidence of cluster work in over two-thirds of the PtS schools we visited. In most cases interviewees reflected that work undertaken to date was not dissimilar to that which had been undertaken prior to the launch of SCC.
- Many interviewees expressed a desire to expand the focus of future work beyond considerations pertaining primarily to the social and emotional well-being of pupils in order to consider ways in which to improve the '*continuity of learning*'.
- The majority of PtS schools indicated that they were working with other secondary partners (around three-fifths). Further to this, in some of those PtS schools in which collaborative activity was not being actively directed by Senior Leaders, there was evidence that it was being undertaken on an *ad hoc* basis by middle leaders and/or individual practitioners.
- In those PtS schools that appeared to have been working with other secondary partners, a number of different types of partnership were observed that had been developed for different purposes. These included relationships developed with **schools with 'areas of excellence'** to support the sharing of effective practice; collaborative work with **other PtS schools** that often focussed on developing responses to shared challenges; and collaborative arrangements with **other local schools**, often focussed around developing a shared response to local/regional developments.

### Progress in developing (Single) SDPs ((S)SDPs)

- Awareness of guidance to support the development of an (S)SDP amongst Senior Leaders was high in PtS schools. At the time of our visits just over three-quarters of the PtS schools had an (S)SDP in place, or were in the process of producing one.
- Interviewees were broadly supportive of the concept of the (S)SDP and the desire to ensure that activities identified within a development plan were fully resourced.
- Twenty-one of the 38 PtS schools we visited indicated that they had faced challenges in developing an (S)SDP. In particular: **resourcing the full plan**, given discrepancies between the grant and development planning cycle; **responding to both national and local priorities**; and **producing a single document** that included enough information to be used in a school, while still being of a workable length.

### Awareness and usage of the Pupil Offer

- Awareness of the Pupil Offer was limited. Senior school-based interviewees in only two-fifths of the PtS schools we visited knew how the funding had been used.
- Amongst those interviewees aware of how funding had been used in their school, most recognised the need to improve the range of opportunities open to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, a number queried whether sufficient funding had been made available to them to combat the entrenched disadvantage in their community.

## **4 The support provided by Schools Challenge Cymru Advisers**

- 4.1 In this section we reflect on the support provided by Advisers in supporting improvements in PtS clusters. In particular we consider:
- the approaches adopted by Advisers in identifying and then responding, to the support needs of PtS schools and those of their cluster as a whole
  - the approaches used by Advisers to engage with Senior Leaders within each PtS school
  - the attributes demonstrated by those Advisers who were thought by interviewees as having been most successful in their role.

### **Approaches used by Advisers to identify and meet the support needs of PtS schools**

- 4.2 Each Adviser was appointed by the Welsh Government (in partnership with the relevant Consortium) to provide up to 25 days of support for each PtS cluster to which they were allocated. However, with responsibility for a number of different clusters, Advisers were encouraged to tailor their inputs in order to meet the varying needs of different schools. In practice, it appears that Advisers, depending on the characteristics of the schools under their remit, have used this flexibility to develop different types of relationship with each of their clusters. In broad terms this appears to have led to the implementation of three models of practice.

### **Model 1: Focus on improving leadership and management**

- 4.3 Across all of the PtS clusters that we visited, the first task undertaken by Advisers appeared to have been an assessment of the competency (and indeed capacity) of the Headteacher of the PtS school and that of their wider Senior Leadership Team. Amongst those schools selected for inclusion within the programme, it was evident that some Advisers over time, had come to the view that the Headteacher or other Senior Leaders at particular schools were one of the main barriers to improvement. In such instances, interviewees indicated that the Adviser

had made representations, to that effect, to the school's Governing Body, the appropriate Consortium and the Welsh Government. Where stakeholders were agreed about the need for a change in leadership, individual leaders were encouraged to reflect on their position.

Commonly such schools were found to be those that were perceived to be at risk of further decline even following inclusion within the programme (Group A schools). In these schools Advisers provided intensive support consisting of weekly visits and (frequently) daily contact with Senior Leaders. Such inputs were often reported to be in excess of the 25 days of professional input indicatively allocated to each school.

- 4.4 Advisers in these schools were seen to have taken on a variety of roles and responsibilities beyond those normally associated with an external Adviser. Some led the process for recruiting a new Senior Leadership team, or wrote the Pre-Inspection report prior to a visit from Estyn. In one school, early discussions with a newly appointed Headteacher led to a decision to change the composition of the Senior Leadership Team. Subsequently, the Adviser played a key role in supporting the management of the school budget (which at that time was controlled by the Local Authority), freeing up the Headteacher to focus on the day-to-day management of the school until full-time deputies could be appointed.
- 4.5 Where Senior Leaders were in place and had the capacity to improve, Advisers invested considerable time and effort into building their capacity so that they were better able to manage the challenges facing their school. While encouraging such leaders – particularly those who found themselves in senior roles for the first time – to access formal training courses, Advisers were widely considered by other Senior Leaders in PtS schools as at their most effective when modelling effective practice. A number of the Senior Leaders we spoke to, particularly those in schools that were at risk of further decline, indicated that they had welcomed the opportunity to undertake joint learning-walks/lesson observations. As well as giving the Adviser an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning, such activities were seen as

a valuable opportunity to show leaders what types of behaviours they should be encouraging and how they should be interacting with classroom practitioners.

### **Model 2: Focus on school improvement planning**

- 4.6 In schools in which an Adviser felt there was sufficient capacity within the Senior Leadership Team to support the day-to-day management of the school, but not enough to move the school forward, the Adviser's focus shifted more towards an assessment of the quality of the school's existing SDP. An initial audit of the plan was often used as a vehicle through which to open up a broader discussion about the strength of a school's approach to self-evaluation (including data tracking), the suitability of existing management structures in supporting the sharing of management/performance information across the school and ensuring accountability for pupil performance across the staff-body.
- 4.7 In such cases, Advisers were frequently observed to have structured their engagement around monthly AIB meetings. In daily, or at least weekly contact with the Headteacher in that school, Advisers were widely regarded as adopting the role of a critical friend. Depending on the respective strengths and weaknesses of each school's self-evaluation infrastructure, Advisers were observed as having supported a range of different activities. Nonetheless, a number of commonalities were observed.
- A focus on improving the **use of monitoring data** to support self-evaluation. In many of these schools, interviewees noted that their Adviser had encouraged a much more rigorous approach to the use of pupil-level attainment data to support performance management. In most schools of this type it was noticeable that, following inclusion in SCC, Senior Leaders had started to consider pupil performance at class rather than cohort level and to look for differences in the performance of sub-groups of pupils, such as those eligible for free school meals.
  - In a number of the schools we visited, Advisers had encouraged Senior Leaders to use a wider range of **measures to assess the**

**quality of teaching.** Senior Leaders in these schools reflected that, while in the past the main mechanism for assessing the quality of teaching had been a termly programme of lesson observations, these were now combined with regular '*book-looks*' and the establishment of coaching triads to encourage the sharing of effective practice amongst teaching staff.

- A desire to build the **capacity of the Middle Leadership Team.** In many PtS schools, interviewees reflected on the lack of effective accountability structures, which meant that initiatives supported by the Senior Leadership Team did not have the required effect at classroom level. Following engagement in SCC, a number of interviewees reflected on the emphasis that their Adviser had placed on reviewing existing performance management structures across the school, and empowering Middle Leaders to take increased accountability for teachers/pupils in their subject area/discipline.
- Support in identifying potential partnership activities and **brokering access to additional sources of support.** Although these opportunities varied, depending on the views of individual Advisers, it was noticeable that Advisers encouraged the Senior Leadership Team to look to the wider system as a potential source of long-term support including developing links with other schools or private providers.

### **Model 3: Expert support for school improvement planning**

- 4.8 In a number of PtS clusters, key stakeholders reflected that there was already evidence that, prior to inclusion in SCC, the PtS school had started to improve. In such schools, it was noted that the Senior Leadership Team already had a suitable SDP in place, supported by a solid evidence base. As a result, it was evident that Advisers had taken a more '*hands off*' approach. In a number of cases, visits to the school had been limited to those coinciding with AIB meetings, with any additional support activities identified in response to issues arising at them. Although Headteachers in these schools were broadly complimentary about the contribution of their Adviser, it was noticeable

that they emphasised the importance of their role as an '*independent*' expert rather than a '*critical friend*'. One noted that they had welcomed the '*space provided by the Adviser in supporting their funding application and liaising with their SCC Link Officer at the Consortium*' (Headteacher, PtS School).

### **Approaches used by Advisers to engage with Senior Leaders within PtS schools**

- 4.9 In seeking to support improvements in PtS schools, interviewees at all levels were struck by the importance of an Adviser developing an effective working relationship with the Senior Leadership Team. This was particularly the case in circumstances where their initial work with the school was seen to have contributed to changes in the leadership of that school. Perhaps most important amongst these was the relationship cultivated between the Adviser and the Headteacher as the principal gatekeeper through which access to the rest of the staff cohort could be achieved. Regardless of the scale of the challenges facing the school, it was evident that the most successful Advisers had built their relationships with the Senior Leadership Team on three key elements.

#### **Element 1: Finding the balance between challenge and support**

- 4.10 Finding the correct balance between **challenging ineffective practice** and providing **sufficient support** to enable Senior Leaders to improve was perhaps most important where the strength of the Senior Leadership Team at the school had been questioned (for instance, at a recent Estyn Inspection). In such cases, the Adviser was faced with the need to assess if, in their view, Senior Leaders had the potential to make the improvements required to support a change in performance. It was interesting to note that, of the eight PtS schools we visited that were perceived to be at risk of further decline (Group A schools), over half (five of the eight) indicated that one of the main reasons that they had chosen to engage with their Adviser was the fact that they had sought to act '*authentically*' as a '*critical friend*' (Headteacher, PtS School). As argued by one of the Senior Leaders we spoke to: '*this programme has*

*been different. In the past we have been challenged, but no support has been offered'. (Headteacher, PtS School)* Without providing support alongside challenge, they noted that it was somewhat inevitable that Senior Leaders would become defensive. Where Advisers were ultimately seen as the architect of a change in leadership at a school, it was argued that it was important that the individual in question, and the rest of their senior team, felt that they had been given every opportunity to take the steps they needed to reach the required level of performance.

### **Element 2: Demonstrating independence**

- 4.11 Senior Leaders in just over a quarter of the PtS clusters we visited (11 of the 38) indicated that they had valued the manner in which their Adviser had asserted their independence from their Local Authority, their Consortia and indeed the Welsh Government. As noted by one Headteacher *'in school, we often feel like we are serving a number of masters. SCC has cut through this in providing us with a direct link to the Welsh Government. [Our Adviser] has been vital in ensuring that we can communicate effectively and access the funding we need'* (Headteacher, PtS school). Such feedback is important when considering how to act to alleviate the concerns of Consortia (and indeed Local Authority) representatives that such *'independence'* had the potential to lead to a reduction in the level of collaboration between respective agencies. SCC Link Officers commonly perceived their lack of involvement in decisions taken about the support requirements of individual PtS schools had been to the detriment of their ongoing development.

### **Element 3: Maintaining a strategic focus**

- 4.12 In a challenging environment, many of the Senior Leaders we spoke to welcomed the opportunity to meet with their Adviser and their insistence on focussing on the *'big picture rather than the day-to-day'* (Senior Leader, PtS School). In a number of cases, Headteachers noted that it was only following conversations with their Adviser that they had realised that they were *'spreading themselves too thin'*. Such



conversations often triggered the expansion of the Senior Leadership Team and the use of SCC funding to support Senior Leaders in accessing more non-contact time.

4.13 On the whole, Senior Leaders to whom we spoke indicated that, in their interactions with their Adviser, they had shown themselves conversant in one or more approaches. Nonetheless, and perhaps somewhat inevitably, on some occasions all Advisers (although some more than others) had been perceived to have struck the wrong balance in their dealings with staff at PtS schools. This was felt to have had a number of negative consequences.

- Although, on the whole, the Senior Leaders we spoke to over the course of our visits recognised the need for their school to improve, all expressed concern that, as one of the *'naughty forty'*, there was a risk that the school was not recognised for what it was good at. As noted by one newly appointed Headteacher *'when I arrived staff were deeply suspicious of what I might do. Many were of the view that in order to improve pupil achievement at GCSE, I would sacrifice the ethos of the school - one that cared for the welfare of all of its students, regardless of their academic ability'* (Headteacher, PtS School). In the same way Senior Leaders felt that, at times, their Adviser, in their haste to support improvement, had failed to recognise – or indeed celebrate – what was going well. On occasion, Senior Leaders felt that such praise would have been a powerful symbol to the wider staff cohort that the school was in fact heading in the right direction.
- In those schools where Advisers had worked intensively, a number of the SCC Link Officers and LA Representatives indicated that in their words the Adviser had *'gone native'* and lost both their independence and strategic focus. On such occasions, interviewees queried whether such schools had the potential to become dependent on the level of support provided (which was regarded as far in excess of what the Consortium would be able to offer once the programme drew to a close).

## Understanding the attributes of a successful Adviser

4.14 Over the course of our interviews with key stakeholders in PtS clusters, interviewees were asked to reflect on what their experience of the programme told them about the attributes of a successful Adviser. Despite differences in the perceived level of challenge in different schools, it was noticeable that a number of common attributes were identified. Key attributes of an effective Adviser were found to include:

- **Experienced:** Senior Leaders in just over two-fifths of the schools we visited felt that, to be effective, an Adviser needed to have experienced the demands of Headship. One Headteacher remarked that *'until you have taken on the role it is difficult to relate to the pressures that come with it'* (Headteacher, PtS School). Another noted that it was only once she had taken on the role that she had understood the *'isolation that comes with being the one in charge'*. The opportunity to meet regularly with a fellow Headteacher had been an important *'safety valve'* (Headteacher, PtS School). A number of interviewees reflected further on what constituted an effective background for an Adviser.
  - Interviewees expressed varying opinions as to whether to be effective Advisers needed to have experience within the Welsh Education system or whether it was more advantageous if they were in a position to challenge existing norms.
  - Most of the interviewees indicated that, an effective Adviser needed to have worked in the same phase in which they were tasked with supporting and had worked in schools facing similar challenges. Without such a frame of reference, interviewees felt that there were always doubts about the suitability of the approaches suggested by the Adviser.
- **Strategic-thinker:** A number of interviewees noted how impressed they had been by the speed at which their Adviser had been able to reach an understanding of the challenges faced by the school and to identify a range of potential responses, yet have the patience and resolve to encourage others to take the lead in putting them into

practice. Such opinions are illustrated by the view of one Senior Leader who remarked '*teachers by instinct are **doers**. For a practitioner to have the confidence to sit back and think is almost against our nature*' (Senior Leader, PtS School).

- **A people-person:** Although expressed in a number of ways, a number of interviewees recognised the importance of strong interpersonal skills in helping a successful Adviser to disarm practitioners and build their trust at a time in which their natural disposition may be to be mistrustful or fearful about the consequences of opening up their practice to external criticism.

### **Effectiveness of Advisers in identifying and helping to meet the support needs of PtS schools**

- 4.15 On the whole, interviewees were positive about the role played by the Adviser allocated to their respective PtS cluster, with the majority of interviewees in just over three-quarters (29) of the 38 PtS clusters indicating this was the case. Interestingly, it was often interviewees in clusters that needed the most support that were the most positive about support received. The majority of interviewees in seven of the eight clusters we visited which contained a Group A school were positive about the support provided by their Adviser. Feedback was less positive in those clusters in which the PtS school was considered to have been stable (but widely perceived to be in need of improvement). Of these, the majority of school-based interviewees in just under a third (5 of the 16 clusters) designated as a Group B school indicated that they had found the support offered by their Adviser to have been ineffective.
- 4.16 Given differences in the overall level of need in respective schools, such differences in opinion are understandable. Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on the reasons given by school-based interviewees for their views, particularly where the disposition of Senior Leaders (in particular) had the potential to have an impact on the effectiveness of any support received. Given the level of challenge faced by many Group A schools, it was striking that in most cases the Senior Leadership Team accepted that things needed to change in order for the school to improve. In such

circumstances they were disposed to accept any additional support on offer if it had the potential to help them make the required improvements. In those schools that had been more stable (albeit underperforming) prior to inclusion within SCC, in-school interviewees appeared to fall into one of two camps. They argued either that they had not required support from an Adviser (other than as a conduit through which they could access additional funding), or that, given the challenges facing the school, the Adviser had not had sufficient time to give them the level of support they needed to improve. Interestingly, the Advisers and the representatives at the appropriate Regional Education Consortium/Local Authority disagreed with these views. In most instances both parties regarded the volume of the support provided to these schools by Advisers to be appropriate given their needs.

- 4.17 Staff in Group C schools (those that were perceived to be on a positive improvement trajectory prior to inclusion within SCC) were, in most cases, extremely positive about the support provided by their Advisers. The majority of school-based staff in just under four-fifths of all 14 such clusters indicated that this was the case.
- 4.18 Of those that were dissatisfied with the quality of support provided (the majority of interviewees in three Group C schools), in most cases Senior Leaders noted that their Adviser had spent considerably less time supporting their cluster compared to other PtS clusters. In such instances Senior Leaders were concerned that, as a result, they were not in a position to benefit from participation in the programme as much as other clusters. Therefore, in assessing the impact of the programme, it will be important to consider '*dosage*'. Is the level and intensity of support from Advisers a key factor in determining the performance of a particular school? Or, depending on the needs of individual clusters, do different clusters benefit from access to an Adviser in different ways (that may be less time intensive)? Furthermore, where different PtS clusters are at different stages in their school improvement journey, do they derive the most benefit from other aspects of the programme (for instance access to additional funding)?

4.19 In most instances, the Consortia and Local Authority representatives we spoke to indicated that they felt that the Advisers had been effective in supporting PtS cluster to improve. That said, most questioned whether it was appropriate for Advisers to sit outside of the local school improvement infrastructure, reporting as they do directly to the Welsh Government. For example, a number queried whether more could be done to ensure that Advisers tapped into the support on offer to other local schools (for instance support offered to schools to improve the quality of teaching of literacy and numeracy) and that the benefits of the programme were as widely shared as possible.

## Section Summary: The support provided by Challenge Advisers

### Approaches adopted by Advisers to meet the needs of PtS schools

- Advisers appear to have implemented three models of practice, largely informed by the prior trajectory of PtS schools.
  - **Model 1: Focus on improving leadership and management.** Where Advisers identified the capacity of the existing Senior Leadership team in a PtS school were the main barrier to improvement, Advisers had taken on a range of roles to stabilise the school. Such roles required a level of engagement far in excess of what would be, normally, associated with an external Adviser.
  - **Model 2: Focus on school improvement and planning.** In those schools that were perceived to be stable, but where Senior Leaders were thought to be in need of additional support if the school was to improve, Advisers adopted the role of a critical friend. They were commonly found to focus on supporting Senior Leaders to improve the quality of their self-evaluation infrastructure.
  - **Model 3: Expert support for school improvement planning.** In those schools that were perceived to have started to improve prior to inclusion in SCC, Advisers had often taken on a more limited role. In such cases, input was usually restricted to meetings of the Accelerated Improvement Board. Senior Leaders commonly emphasised the importance of their Adviser as an independent advocate for the school, particularly in dialogue with the Welsh Government and Consortia.

### Strategies used by Advisers to engage Senior Leaders in PtS schools

- Interviewees indicated that successful Advisers had adopted a number of common approaches to secure the engagement of Senior Leaders in PtS schools.
  - Striking an appropriate balance between **challenging ineffective practice** and **providing sufficient support** to enable Senior Leaders to improve. Interviewees remarked that their experience of working with their Adviser had been markedly different to their experiences in the past, where their Advisers had simply not had the time to help them overcome the barriers that they faced.
  - Demonstrating their **independence**. Interviewees were found to value the manner that their Adviser had asserted their independence from their LA, Consortia and, indeed, the Welsh Government, in ensuring that the needs of individual schools were prioritised.
  - Maintaining a **strategic focus**. Senior Leaders noted that, in a challenging environment, it was too easy to focus on operational matters rather than responding to strategic issues that would ultimately support improvement.

### Understanding the attributes of a successful Adviser

- Interviewees indicated that successful Advisers often had a number of common attributes.
  - Having **experience of the demands of Headship**. A number of interviewees noted that, without having experienced the role, it was extremely difficult to provide an effective source of support and challenge to somebody in this role.
  - The ability to think **strategically**. Many interviewees expressed admiration of the speed with which their Adviser had been able to assess the needs of their school and had helped Senior Leaders develop a strategy by which to take their school forward.
  - Strong **inter-personal** skills. Interviewees noted that it was vital not to underestimate the importance of these skills in allowing Advisers to build relationships with practitioners in PtS schools.

## **5 The work of Accelerated Improvement Boards**

5.1 This section considers the work of Accelerated Improvement Boards (AIBs) in supporting improvements in PtS clusters. In particular we examine:

- the extent to which AIBs (where in place) have operated in a manner consistent with Welsh Government guidance
- the role and contribution of attendees to AIB meetings
- the extent to which AIBs are perceived to have provided an effective source of support for PtS schools and helped them to improve.

### **Compliance with Welsh Government guidance on the composition of AIBs and the regularity of board meetings**

- 5.2 Of the 38 PtS schools visited over the course of our fieldwork (in June-July 2015), 37 were found to be maintaining a functioning AIB. Membership of each AIB comprised of the Headteacher of the PtS school, the school's Adviser, their Chair of the Governing Body and the Headteacher of a primary school within their PtS cluster. In a number of instances, the appropriate Consortia was represented rather than the Local Authority (although there were cases in which both organisations were represented). In many of the schools in which the AIB was considered most effective, meetings were also attended by other members of the Senior Leadership Team who took responsibility for reporting on their area of responsibility within the SDP.
- 5.3 In the remaining school, setting up an AIB had been deemed inappropriate given concerns around the performance of the school. That said, regular meeting between the Headteacher, the school's Adviser, representatives from the Local Authority and the Consortium appeared to be functioning along similar lines as an AIB, with a similar membership structure and regularity of meeting (at least monthly). In the future, it was hoped that the Chair of Governors at the school would also be invited to attend. At that stage, interviewees considered it inappropriate to invite a Headteacher from the local Primary School to the meetings, as the agenda was focused entirely on the steps that

needed to be taken to ensure that the school was in a position to leave Special Measures as soon as possible.

- 5.4 In most cases, the AIBs appeared to have met on a regular basis, although not always monthly (this occurred in just 21 of the PtS clusters we visited). In most other cases, meetings appear to have occurred once every half-term. The main reason for this less frequent meeting appeared to be purely logistical and related to the challenge of finding dates on which all members of the AIB could attend (or at least enough people to make the meetings meaningful). As noted by one Adviser, finding such a date was no small matter, particularly where she could find herself attending one or two such meetings a week towards the beginning of a new half term. As a result a lot of time could be spent on identifying when AIB meetings could take place.
- 5.5 That said, interviewees in a number of schools (particularly Group C schools), also questioned whether having meetings on a more regular basis than half-termly was worthwhile. They noted that, in most instances, self-evaluation activities within a school were conducted in line with the academic cycle, which meant that activity commonly took place in the last couple of weeks of each (half-) term. In order to benefit from access to this information, meetings needed to take place either at the very end of one half-term or at the start of the next one.
- 5.6 Interviewees also questioned whether monthly meetings set an unrealistic expectation of how quickly any changes (supported through the SDP) could be embedded in the practice of the school. In order to ensure that decisions made by the AIB were evidence-based, it was felt, therefore, that less frequent meetings were preferable.

### **The role and contribution of AIB members**

- 5.7 Over the course of our fieldwork, interviewees were asked to reflect on the role and contribution of the different stakeholders to the AIB. Through such feedback it is evident that the most successful AIBs were characterised by a clear focus and remit and an emphasis on making use of the expertise of the different members.



### *Senior Leaders at a PtS school*

- 5.8 Interviewees indicated that the most successful AIB meetings were those chaired by the Headteacher of the PtS school, though it was recognised that not all had been confident enough to do this, at least for the first few meetings. In these instances, the school's Adviser had generally chaired the meetings. That said, even where Headteachers had chaired the meetings, it was noted that there were times at which the Advisers had '*led*' the agenda. In most cases this was felt to have been appropriate, but in others it was argued that this had undermined their authority. For instance a number of Advisers indicated that they had felt compelled to take a lead in AIB meetings to ensure that the school moved forward. Yet, in these schools, some Senior Leaders argued that, while such a step may have been seen as necessary, it had sent a powerful signal to the rest of the school that the Headteacher was no longer '*in charge*'.
- 5.9 A number of interviewees also queried whether the Headteacher should both act as a chair and report on the progress of the school. A number of the Headteachers we spoke too suggested that, at times, performing the dual role meant that there was a danger that meetings could become '*bogged-down*' (Headteacher, PtS School) or felt a bit like an '*interrogation*' (Headteacher, PtS School). It was noticeable that, and perhaps partly as a response to this, an increasing number of schools over the course of the first year of the programme had started to invite one or more members of the Senior Leadership Team to AIB meetings. In such meetings while the Headteacher chaired the meeting, Senior Leaders had taken on responsibility for presenting on the areas of the SDP for which they had delegated authority, or on other issues of interest that AIB members had chosen to put on the agenda. Indeed, at the time of the fieldwork, interviewees from just under three-quarters of the PtS clusters that were visited indicated that Senior Leaders now attended the AIB meetings on a regular basis.
- 5.10 In addition to alleviating the pressure on the Headteacher, school interviewees reported that the attendance of other members of the

Senior Leadership Team could have a number of other important benefits. Perhaps most importantly, interviewees felt that the contribution of Senior Leaders to AIB meetings had highlighted the fact that accountability for the performance of the school was *shared*, and was not solely the responsibility of the Headteacher.

- 5.11 Furthermore, interviewees indicated that the need to present with authority on areas of the SDP had led to the promotion of a much more systematic approach to self-evaluation. In one school, for example, in anticipation of the thorough questioning that a Senior Leader expected to receive at AIB meetings, they had introduced a regular cycle of performance management meetings with Subject Leaders to ensure that they had access to the most accurate and up to date performance information.

#### *Challenge Advisers*

- 5.12 The conduct of the Adviser was often crucial to the effectiveness of the AIB in supporting a PtS cluster. As discussed above, the most successful AIBs appeared to be those in which the Adviser kept the right balance between empowering the Headteacher while ensuring that the meeting was purposeful. In a number of instances, interviewees reflected that the main contribution of the Adviser had been in setting the tone of the AIB from the outset, ensuring that meetings were relatively challenging and focussed on those areas which were likely to support the greatest improvements. In such cases, it was felt that the quality of their contribution had appeared to have led other stakeholders to improve the quality of their own input.
- 5.13 Where meetings had been less effective, interviewees noted that Advisers had either taken on responsibility for presenting progress against the SDP or had been too challenging in the meetings. In both instances, it was felt that the overall effect was to undermine the authority of the Headteacher. In interpreting this feedback, however, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the wider remit of the Adviser. In such instances, while an Adviser may seek, legitimately, to point out areas of underperformance, the AIB appeared rarely, if ever, to be used as a

platform on which to discuss how to meet school support needs. In reality, it appeared that where support needs were identified, it was the responsibility of an Adviser to follow these up with the Headteacher after the meeting.

#### *Role of the Chair of the Governing Body*

5.14 All 37 PtS schools appeared to have invited their Chair of Governing Body (hereafter called the 'Chair') to attend board meetings. On the whole, interviewees reported that attendance had been relatively high, although in some cases Chairs had struggled to get time off work to attend all of the meetings (particularly where they occurred on a monthly basis). In such cases it appeared quite common for the Chair to meet with the Headteacher and the Adviser separately, in advance of full Governing Body meetings (normally held once a term). Overall Chairs appeared to be quite passive at meetings and were thought to add little to the discussions that took place. Nonetheless, interviewees (including many of the Chairs we spoke too) indicated that it was important that the Governing Body was represented. As noted by one of the Chairs who was interviewed, as a '*lay person*' it was a valuable opportunity for Governors to develop a better understanding of '*the tools of school improvement*' (Chair of the Governing Body, PtS School). A number also felt that it was important that the Governing Body did not appear to have been marginalised through SCC, as ultimately they would be responsible for holding the Senior Leadership Team to account once the programme drew to a close.

5.15 Interestingly, although Chairs commonly indicated that they had benefited from the experience of attending AIB meetings, few reported that attending such meetings had led them to change the way that they approached their role. As noted by a number of the Advisers we spoke too, where the quality of Leadership and Management in a school was perceived to have been an issue for a number of years, it was worth considering whether the Governing Body also held some responsibility for this. The Welsh Government may wish to reflect on whether additional support should be made available through the programme to

improve the capacity of Governing Bodies to undertake their school improvement function.

*Role of representatives from the PtS cluster*

5.16 In-line with Welsh Government guidelines, membership of functioning AIBs included the Headteacher of a cluster primary school. Over the course of the first year of the programmes, interviewees indicated that the attendance of primary leaders had been variable. In most cases this appeared to be related to the strength of cluster work prior to the launch of SCC, or at least the strength of the relationship between the Headteacher in the PtS school and the primary Headteacher whom they had invited.

5.17 A number of the Headteachers from cluster primary schools indicated that they had welcomed the opportunity to attend AIB meetings and learn more about the challenges facing the PtS school. In most cases, interviewees were of the view that they would get more out of the meetings once the PtS school was in a position to consider how to improve cross-phase working. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that levels of engagement with primary schools were much better in those secondary schools that were perceived to have a greater capacity for improvement, and who were better able to consider issues beyond the school gate. Interviewees noted that joint working was particularly strong where raising the performance of pupils at Key Stage 3 was a priority in the SDP. It was noted that this frequently led to a wide-ranging discussion about the performance of pupils on entry into Year 7 and what could be done to improve the quality of their transition from Year 6.

*Representatives from the appropriate Consortium/Local Authority*

5.18 Initial guidance from the Welsh Government stipulated that AIBs would include a representative from the Local Authority. Following discussions with the Welsh Government, it was also decided to allow the attendance of a representative from the appropriate Consortium. In most cases, representatives from the Consortium (commonly the SCC Link Officer) attended in addition to representatives from the Local Authority (unless

they held a part-time role with both organisations). Feedback on the role and contribution of LA/Consortium representatives was limited and engagement appears to have been variable. Representatives appeared to prioritise meetings in which the PtS school was perceived to be in greater need of support (commonly Group A schools). Beyond this the contribution of representatives to the AIB was largely perceived to be minimal.

- 5.19 Even so, school-based interviewees suggested that it was important that both organisations were represented. As noted by one such representative; *'although, through SCC, schools have started reporting directly to the Welsh Government, we are accountable through Estyn for their performance'* (SCC Link Officer). A number of the school-based interviewees we spoke to also indicated that they welcomed the opportunity to get people around the table and develop a sense of shared ownership for improvement. As noted by one Headteacher; *'in the past conversations with Advisers have seemed to be all about what we need to do. Following the development of the AIB it feels like there is a greater sense of shared ownership'* (Headteacher, PtS School).

### **Perceptions of the effectiveness of AIBs in supporting improvements in PtS clusters**

- 5.20 In those PtS schools that had set up an AIB following inclusion in SCC, interviewees were largely positive about the experience of working with one. Indeed the majority of interviewees in just over three-quarters (28 of 37) of the PtS clusters we visited indicated that they felt that the board had contributed to improvement within their schools. That said, when considered in relation to the historic performance trajectory of each school, there appeared to be notable differences in levels of satisfaction and perceived effectiveness with the performance of the board. Interestingly, AIBs appear to have functioned most effectively in schools that were relatively stable (Group B). Staff in only one of the fourteen such schools we visited indicated that they were ambivalent about the contribution of their AIB.

- 5.21 Staff appeared least satisfied with the contribution of their AIB in those schools that were perceived to be at risk of further decline (Group A). The majority of staff in over three-fifths (five of the eight) of the schools indicated that they were ambivalent about the contribution of their AIB or felt that it had been ineffective.
- 5.22 Such findings are perhaps best understood through consideration of how AIBs have sought to exercise their support function. Broadly in line with the expectations of the Welsh Government, the interviewees in just under two-thirds (24 of 37) of the PtS clusters we visited indicated that the primary role of the AIB had been to review the progress of the PtS school in implementing their SDP (in many cases termed a School Improvement Plan, or SIP). In a number Group A schools, interviewees indicated that, for a large portion of the first year of the programme, the school had not had a SDP in place, or self-evaluation infrastructure was weak. In such cases, interviewees reflected that the AIB meetings had often lacked the structure/tools necessary to hold Senior Leaders to account for their performance. As one Headteacher noted *'I am happy to present the most recent batch of [performance] data but we all know that it is largely meaningless'* (Headteacher, PtS School). In such cases, it appears that the focus of AIB meetings was often monitoring the spending of SCC funding. While interviewees accepted that this was an important function, a number questioned if it was necessary to bring so many people around the table to perform what was in essence an administrative task.
- 5.23 Conversely, in Group B schools, interviewees were often much more confident about the strength of their SDP. While interviewees commonly reflected that more could be done to improve the quality of self-evaluation at the school, it was clear that many appropriate systems and processes were in place. In such cases, it appeared that AIBs had functioned much more effectively. Indeed, by requiring Senior Leadership Teams to regularly reflect on the performance of the school against its plan, it was argued that this had led them to treat this part of their role as increasingly important. As a result it was noted that, in a number of instances, the need to present at AIB meetings had resulted

in changes to performance management structures in the school alongside a '*more forensic approach to data analysis*' (Headteacher PtS School).

5.24 Although, in most cases, staff in the 14 Group C schools (those perceived to be on a positive trajectory prior to inclusion in SCC) also indicated that they felt that AIB meetings had been helpful. The majority of staff in three of them indicated that they were unsure about its contribution to school improvement. In such schools, while interviewees recognised the importance of ensuring that SCC funding was used effectively, there was concern that AIB meetings reflected yet one more administrative burden on Headteachers that took them away from their day-to-day responsibilities. A number noted that the Headteacher continued to meet with many of the attendees of AIB meetings on a regular basis and often found themselves presenting the same information. On such occasions, interviewees wondered whether the number of meetings could be reduced (as appeared to have occurred elsewhere).

### **Section Summary:**

#### **Compliance with Welsh Government guidance**

- 37 of the 38 PtS schools we visited had set-up an AIB. Membership of each AIB comprised of the Headteacher of the PtS school, the school's Adviser, the Chair of their Governing Body and the Headteacher of a primary school within the PtS cluster. In a number of instances, the appropriate Consortia, rather than the Local Authority, was represented. In many schools, meetings were attended (where appropriate) by other members of the Senior Leadership Team.
- In most cases AIBs appear to have met regularly although fewer than half had met on a monthly basis. In most cases half-termly meetings were considered more appropriate (and logistically less challenging to arrange).

#### **The role and contribution of AIB members**

- Interviewees indicated that the most successful AIBs were characterised by a clear focus and remit and an emphasis on making use of the different expertise of the different members. In particular:
  - Interviewees indicated that AIBs were often most effective when chaired by the Headteacher of the PtS school. In some instances, it was noted that Advisers had led meetings. While this was felt to have made sure that the school in question had moved forward, it had the potential to undermine the authority of the Senior Leadership Team. It was noted that AIBs were often more effective when other members of the Senior Leadership Team were invited to present on areas for which they were accountable and this also reduced the burden on Headteachers.
  - The conduct of Advisers was considered crucial to setting the correct tone to the meetings. It was noted that the most successful Advisers did not lead the meetings but steered the dialogue towards those issues that had the potential to have the greatest impact on school improvement.

#### **Perceptions of the effectiveness of AIBs**

- Interviewees in over three-quarters of the PtS schools with an AIB indicated that they felt that it had made a positive contribution to improvement within the school.
- Differences in levels of reported satisfaction with the effectiveness of AIBs, appeared, at least in part, to relate to the prior improvement trajectory of different PtS schools. A range of factors appear to be responsible for this:
  - AIBs appear to have functioned best in those schools with an effective SDP (Group B and Group C schools). In those schools (commonly Group A schools) that did not have an effective school improvement processes in place, the AIB was found to lack direction.
  - Some interviewees expressed concern about the additional administrative burden placed on Headteachers (and indeed other Senior Leaders) by the need to support AIB meetings. This was particularly the case in those schools that were perceived to have started to improve prior to inclusion in SCC, where it was queried whether the requirement for an AIB was overly bureaucratic.



## 6 Use of SCC funding

6.1 In this section we consider the uses made of SCC funding in supporting PtS schools to meet their school improvement objectives. Key issues include:

- applications for SCC funding from PtS schools
- the ways in which PtS schools have used SCC funding
- views on the policies and processes put in place by the Welsh Government to support the paying out of funding
- the extent to which SCC funding was perceived as helping to meet the needs of PtS schools.

### Interest in SCC funding from PtS Schools

6.2 Perhaps not surprisingly, interviewees in PtS schools, almost without exception, welcomed the opportunity to put forward proposals for additional funding through SCC. Furthermore, school-based consultees in just over two-fifths of the PtS schools (15 of 38) noted that, without access to SCC funding, they would not have been able to resource areas of their SDP. Challenges in supporting school improvement priorities appeared particularly acute in those schools that were widely perceived to face the greatest challenges (Group A schools), half of whom indicated that the school was presently in financial deficit (4 of 8). In such cases, access to a separate revenue stream was thought by many interviewees to have been invaluable.

6.3 Those schools that were not faced with such an acute shortage of funding were appreciative of access to additional funding, but some interviewees queried whether a grant funding mechanism was entirely appropriate in encouraging PtS schools to consider how best to meet their school improvement objectives in a sustainable fashion. As one Headteacher summarised *'Last year, seventeen per cent of the total budget of the school was received in the form of grants each year. Each grant required us to develop an action plan and was offered on the condition that funding was spent by the end of the school year. While I support the Welsh Government in seeking to ensure that public money is spent effectively, the need to mitigate against the risk that funding will be*

*withdrawn is having precisely the opposite effect. I have teachers on one year fixed contracts [July 2015] whom I have told I will try to keep on next year. However, until the grants are agreed, I will have no money to pay them with. Such [a method of] planning is unsustainable'.*

(Headteacher, PtS School). Interviewees queried whether, instead, the SCC funding should be paid out as part of the core school revenue grant, or if the grant process could, at the very least be aligned with the academic planning cycle.

### **Ways in which SCC funding has been used by PtS schools**

6.4 Reflective of the wide range of different challenges faced by PtS clusters (see Section 3 for more information), PtS schools appeared to have sought to use SCC capital/revenue funding to support a wide-range of different purposes, from refurbishing the school library to supporting peer-to-peer work with local secondary schools. Nonetheless, consideration of the feedback from interviewees reveals a number of common areas of expenditure.

- Funding to support **targeted pupil interventions**. Although, in many cases, interviewees found it difficult to disaggregate between SCC and non-SCC related expenditure (such as the Pupil Deprivation Grant)<sup>12</sup>, staff in just under a quarter of the PtS schools we visited (9 of 38) indicated that they had used SCC funding to support additional pupil interventions, particularly for those pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, in one school, funding had been used to support a breakfast club for those pupils who might otherwise start the school day without having eaten a proper meal. In another school, funding had been used to deliver a catch-up programme of literacy interventions for those pupils who were perceived to be at risk of falling behind in their studies.

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<sup>12</sup> The Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) was introduced by the Welsh Government in 2013 with the aim of helping schools to close the attainment gap between pupils who are eligible for a Free School Meal and those who are not. As noted in the evaluation of the PDG such funding has commonly been used by schools to support many of the same types of activity which interviewees indicated that SCC funding had been used for (Pye et al, 2015). As such, in some instances it is likely that SCC funding has been used to enhance existing activity rather than funding new activity.

- Support for teacher **continuing professional development** (CPD). Staff in just under a fifth of the schools we visited indicated that they had used SCC funding to support professional development activities such as external training courses. The training provided mirrored the needs of individual schools. That said, common foci were found to include training to support improvements in the quality of teaching of literacy and numeracy and the use of data to support effective teaching and learning.
- Capital funding to improve the quality of a school's **learning environment**. A number of the schools visited indicated that one of the main challenges facing them was the quality of the existing learning environment. In such cases, it was perhaps not surprising that SCC funding had been used to improve the environment in the school. For instance, in one school, SCC funding had been used to refurbish the school library, including provision of laptops for pupils to access after school. Staff in just under a fifth of the schools visited indicated that they had used funding in this way.
- Funding to meet the costs of recruiting **additional support staff** (often in pastoral roles). Staff in just under a fifth of the schools visited indicated that they had used funding to recruit additional support staff. Often recruited into pastoral roles, staff appeared to have been appointed with a dual aim; to improve the quality of support available to pupils at risk from disengagement from learning (often manifest in poor behaviour at school or non-attendance) and freeing up qualified teaching staff to concentrate on improving the quality of their practice. Given recent work from the Public Policy Institute for Wales and their conclusion that pastoral support can be most effective when it is delivered by teaching staff as part of a whole-school approach, in future fieldwork it will be important to reflect on the performance of the different approaches adopted by PtS schools (Carter-Davies, 2015).

6.5 In identifying which interventions to support using SCC funding, interviewees frequently reflected on the importance of ensuring that

improvements were sustainable over the medium to long-term. It is notable that, aside from funding used to support additional CPD and improvements in the learning environment, in most cases funding was reported to have been used to support '*additional*' activity. At the end of the programme, there is clearly a risk that schools will no longer be able to afford to take some of this activity forward, and any related short-term improvements in the pupil outcomes of future cohorts will not be sustained. Faced with this dilemma, a number of the Headteachers we spoke to indicated that they would undoubtedly have to cut back on some aspects of their improvement plan. However, they hoped that by focussing on what appeared to be most effective, and capitalising on an initial 'bounce', any rebound in results would be avoided, or at least kept to a minimum. In light of this finding, the Welsh Government may wish to reflect on whether additional steps can be taken to increase the sustainability of programme expenditure.

### **Views on the policies and processes put in place by the Welsh Government in supporting the paying out of funding**

6.6 Although appreciative of the opportunity presented to PtS clusters to access funding to help them meet their school improvement objectives, the majority of interviewees were critical of the policies and procedures put in place by the Government to support the paying out of SCC funding. Indeed, some felt that processes adopted by the Welsh Government had detracted from the effectiveness of the funding in helping to meet the school improvement objectives of PtS schools. Key issues included:

- **The timing of the grant funding cycle:** Those involved in pulling together initial applications for SCC funding noted that pressure to submit an application had been to the detriment of the quality of planning. As noted by one Headteacher, the requirement by the Welsh Government to submit an application for funding by December 2014 appeared to contradict the expectation that PtS schools would work towards the development of a SSDP. They felt that it would have been better if the application process had been more fully

aligned with the standard self-evaluation cycle (which commonly runs in tandem with the academic year).

A number of the Advisers we spoke too also raised concerns that the speed at which PtS schools had been required to submit proposals had meant that they had been able to exercise limited, if any, oversight over the plan. In general, Advisers reflected that the quality of the funding application made by the school was often closely linked to that of their SDP. Where these were sub-standard there was concern that funding had not been used as effectively as it could have been. In one case, the Adviser noted that a school's funding application, and the SDP it was based on, were '*totally unworkable*'. In this instance, following their engagement with the school, the Adviser had secured agreement with the Welsh Government to submit a new application.

- **Concerns around the quality of guidance:** Amongst those interviewees who had been involved in the application process, many queried whether sufficient guidance had been provided by the Welsh Government as to the basis on which their proposals would be assessed. They welcomed the fact that the Welsh Government had given schools the freedom to identify what they felt they needed – often meaning that they could allocate resources to things that could not be funded through other sources. They felt, however, that without further guidance schools would, over time, increasingly start asking for things that the Welsh Government **appeared** to look on favourably rather than those that might have the greatest impact. For instance, one Senior Leader indicated that they felt that the size of the capital allocations, had not in their view, matched the level of need individual schools. This perceived lack of consistency in awarding funds had led to some confusion.
- **Concerns around the suitability of existing monitoring processes:** A small number of interviewees (commonly from Group A schools) noted that the schools selected for inclusion for SCC were selected precisely because they were not '*normal functioning*' institutions. In

such circumstances, it was queried whether it was appropriate to ask for Senior Leaders to monitor expenditure forensically at a time at which they were already heavily committed to school improvement activities. That said, a number of Advisers noted that the need to report to the AIB on project spend had helped build financial capability within certain PtS schools. In future, the Welsh Government may wish to reflect on whether the right balance has been struck on this occasion.

### **The role of SCC funding in meeting the needs of PtS schools**

- 6.7 Notwithstanding the criticism around the paying out of SCC funding, the majority of school-based interviewees (in just under three-quarters of the visited PtS schools -27 of the 38) felt that, overall, the funding had had a positive impact and had allowed their school to make progress in achieving their school improvement objectives. Interviewees appeared to be particularly positive about the flexibility afforded by SCC funding to consider alternative approaches to meeting challenges within the school. It was argued that, faced with a fixed pot of money for school improvement, in the past Senior Leaders might have chosen to stick with tried and tested approaches, rather than those that might have a greater impact. The availability of SCC funding was widely felt to have given PtS schools greater freedom to pursue these in innovative ways.
- 6.8 That said, the extent to which funding was perceived to have been used effectively was often seen to relate to the quality of a school's improvement planning. Strikingly, of those four schools in which the majority of staff indicated that the funding had been ineffective, three were Group A schools (those commonly perceived to be at risk of further decline even following inclusion in SCC). In justifying their views, staff commonly reflected a lack of clarity about what SCC funding was to be used for. Others queried whether the systems and processes in place at the school would support an assessment of the performance of the funding against the outcomes anticipated in the initial application.
- 6.9 School-based interviewees in seven PtS schools indicated that they were unsure about the effectiveness of SCC funding in helping schools

to meet their school improvement objectives. Six of these were Group B schools (of those perceived to be on a stable performance trajectory prior to inclusion in SCC). In such schools, staff appeared broadly satisfied with the quality/suitability of their proposals, but felt that a number of other issues had meant that the funding had not been as impactful as it might have been. Commonly raised issues included:

- **Grant size:** Interviewees indicated that, in assessing the effectiveness of SCC funding, it was important to recognise the relatively small amount of funding allocated to individual schools in relation to the overall volume of funding allocated from other sources to meeting school improvement objectives. As such, it was noted that assessing the impact of the funding compared to that achieved via other means would be extremely difficult.
- **Ensuring additionality:** It was argued by a number of interviewees that while the Welsh Government was right to encourage schools to seek '*additionality*' from SCC funding rather than duplicating existing activity, it was important that this was not seen to encourage '*add-ons*'. As noted by one of the Headteachers '*to be most effective SCC funding should be integrated into the heart of a school's development plan*' (Headteacher, PtS school). It was felt that, albeit in a small number of cases, the desire to demonstrate that SCC funding would add to rather than duplicate other sources of funding had led schools to avoid approaches that might have had a greater impact.

## Section Summary: Use of SCC funding

### Interest in SCC funding

- Almost without exception, interviewees were appreciative of the opportunity afforded by PtS schools to access additional funding through SCC.
- School-based consultees in over two-fifths of the 38 PtS schools we visited indicated that, without access to additional funding, their school would not have been able to resource areas of their SDP.

### Ways in which SCC funding has been used

- Consideration of feedback from interviewees reveals a number of common areas of expenditure<sup>13</sup>.
  - Funding to support **targeted pupil interventions**. Interviewees in just under a quarter of visited schools indicated that they had used funding for this purpose. Interventions were often designed to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who were deemed to have fallen behind in their studies.
  - Funding to run **CPD courses for teachers**. Staff in just over a fifth of visited schools indicated that SCC funding had been used in this way. Although the content of the training mirrored the varying needs of different schools, support in teaching literacy and numeracy, and how to use assessment data to support teaching and learning were common foci.
  - Capital investment to improve the **school learning environment**. For example, in one school SCC funding had been used to refurbish the school library. Funding for this had been accessed by around a fifth of the schools visited.
  - Funding to recruit **additional support staff**. Staff in one fifth of the PtS schools indicated that they had used funds in this way. Often recruited into pastoral positions, such staff often appeared to have a dual role; to improve pupil engagement and to allow teaching staff to focus on the quality of teaching and learning at the school.

### Feedback on the administration of the funding by the Welsh Government

- Although appreciative of the opportunity to bid for additional funding, interviewees indicated a number of areas in which the procedures put in place by the Welsh Government to support the paying out of funding could be improved. In particular:
  - **The timing of the grant funding cycle**: A number of interviewees felt that the speed at which they had been required to submit applications had been to the detriment of their quality.
  - **The quality of funding guidance**: Many of those interviewees involved in the application process queried whether the Welsh Government had provided sufficient guidance to allow schools to develop applications that would be treated favourably by them
  - **The suitability of existing monitoring processes**: Some interviewees, particularly those from Group A schools, queried whether it was appropriate to place the administrative burden of accounting for the expenditure of SCC funding on schools at a time in which Senior Leaders were heavily committed to the task of turning their school around. That said, a number of Advisers felt that this requirement helped to build financial capability.

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<sup>13</sup>Please note that at this stage it was not possible to consider overall levels of expenditure by type of funded activity. As such analysis is based on the incidence of activity rather than any assessment of size/scale.



### **The role of SCC funding in meeting the needs of PtS schools**

- The majority of school-based interviewees indicated that they felt that SCC funding had had a positive impact.
- Where SCC funding was perceived to have been used less effectively, interviewees reflected that this was often associated with a lack of quality in school improvement planning, in particular, a lack of clarity in the school over what would be achieved if funding was used in a particular way.
- In a number of schools, interviewees were satisfied with the quality/suitability of their application but felt that the effectiveness of SCC funding could be increased if:
  - **The overall size of the grants was increased:** Interviewees felt that it was important to recognise the relatively limited size of the grants they had received and their relative contribution to the delivery of their school's improvement plan.
  - **Schools were encouraged to leverage SCC grant funding:** A number of interviewees indicated that, while the Welsh Government was right to ensure that SCC funding, was not used to duplicate existing activity, schools should not be discouraged for leveraging the impact of multiple funding sources, where this was appropriate.
  - **The timing of the grant cycle was adjusted to fit with the academic cycle:** Interviewees queried whether the need to spend grant funding over the course of one academic year had the potential to encourage the adoption of less sustainable approaches to school improvement.

## 7 Approaches adopted by PtS schools

- 7.1 This section will reflect on the approaches adopted by PtS schools, following inclusion in SCC, and the way(s) they have sought to respond to their barriers to improvement. In particular, we consider what, if any, model(s) of practice underpin the approaches adopted by PtS schools.

### **Overcoming barriers to improvement**

- 7.2 As discussed in Section 2, consideration of the feedback from interviewees illustrates the complex and often inter-related challenges facing PtS schools. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of commonalities, namely, the need to address deficits in the quality of leadership and management at the school, to improve the quality of teaching and learning (particularly in core subjects), and to address the consequences of socio-economic deprivation on pupil attainment. As such, it is reassuring that the approaches adopted by PtS schools in seeking to improve have largely reflected these overarching priorities. Underpinning schools' responses to these priorities, it is important to reflect both on the extent to which they have been regarded as of equal importance, and the strategies or approaches adopted in order to meet each school's improvement objectives.

### *Supporting improvements in the quality of leadership and management*

- 7.3 It is perhaps not surprising that activities designed to support improvements in the quality of leadership and management were those most frequently described by staff in PtS schools, with over four-fifths of the schools (32 of 38) describing specific activities in this domain. Strikingly, however, the focus of such work was more often on **improving the quality of the process around, and the systems to support, accurate self-evaluation** rather than improving the leadership and management skills of Senior Leaders. Staff in 24 of the 38 clusters we visited indicated that their school had undertaken work to improve the quality of their school self-evaluation, often by introducing a new data-tracking system or by reforming performance management protocols/policies. Staff in only 16 of the 38 clusters visited indicated that

their school had invested *directly* in training to support improvements in the leadership and management of Senior Leaders. In practice, such figures are likely to exclude the leadership development work done by the Adviser (which would not have been included within the SDP), and there may be a question as to whether such training is being prioritised sufficiently.

- 7.4 Those schools that had accessed **training and support for Senior Leaders** reported that it had been extremely effective. In one PtS school, the Headteacher indicated that the whole of her Senior Leadership Team had attended a three-day residential programme to support the development of '*outstanding leaders*'. She felt that attendance at this course had been invaluable in redefining the ethos of the school and setting '*non-negotiables*' that now governed their professional practice. She hoped that this would provide the solid foundation on which the school could build in the future.

*Mitigating the impact of socio-economic deprivation on pupil attainment*

- 7.5 In over two-thirds of the PtS clusters we visited (26 of 38), staff indicated that they had sought to invest in **additional support staff**. In practice, however, these staff appear to have been employed with a dual purpose; not only to support teachers (where necessary) in class but also to **mitigate the impact of socio-economic deprivation** on pupil attainment by freeing up teaching staff to concentrate on raising the quality of their day-to-day practice. For example, in a number of such schools it was noted that, in the past, Heads of Year had spent a considerable amount of time trying to tackle issues relating to pupil behaviour, attendance and engagement. As one Headteacher argued '*although important work, we started to ask ourselves if, in seeking to tackle these issues, teachers were becoming increasingly distracted from both their work in the classroom and the performance of those pupils who were sitting in front of them*' (Headteacher PtS School). As a result, such schools had recruited an Attendance Officer or an Educational Welfare Officer to respond to these issues. With the support of this additional capacity, interviewees indicated that Heads of Year

(sometimes renamed Progress Managers) had more time to take a much more pro-active approach to monitoring the performance of individual pupils, and ensure that interventions were put in place where necessary.

#### *Improvements in teaching and learning*

7.6 To support improvements in teaching and learning, staff in just over two-thirds of the PtS clusters we visited indicated that, through their SDP, they had invested in **additional IT equipment**. In practice, investment appears to have supported three main types of expenditure.

- **Investment in IT infrastructure:** In a small number of cases, staff indicated that the lack of effective core infrastructure, such as a functioning wireless network and access to reliable desktop and laptop computers was preventing them from adopting pedagogical approaches that might to better address the needs of their pupils. In such schools, upgrading the IT infrastructure at the school was seen as a central priority.
- **Funding for teaching aids:** In around one half of the PtS schools we visited (19 of 38) Senior Leaders had invested SCC funds in IRIS Connect™ technology. Developed as part of a coaching model, access to video lesson observations was being used to identify and share effective practice across different disciplines, whilst also reducing cover-costs and the disruption caused to pupils' learning during teachers' absence on face-to-face training courses<sup>14</sup>.
- **Investment in devices for use by pupils:** In just over one third of the PtS schools we visited (13 of 38), staff indicated that, in 2014/15, the school had invested in IT equipment for use directly by pupils. For example, in one school, SCC funding had been used to help create a new learning resource centre in which pupils could access IT equipment to complete their homework. In another, KS4 pupils had all been given a tablet computer (funded in part by SCC funding).

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<sup>14</sup>This is a teacher driven video CPD system which can record lessons and facilitate live remote coaching, information on IRIS Connect can be found at: <http://www.irisconnect.co.uk/>

- 7.7 Staff in just under two-thirds of the schools we visited (26 of 38) indicated that they had invested in **CPD for teaching staff**. In practice, such views are likely to have underestimated the amount of in-house provision delivered by Senior Leaders in PtS schools (for instance in support of the introduction of IRIS Connect™).
- 7.8 The content of the training provided for teaching staff varied depending on the views of Senior Leaders at the school. That said, there appeared to be an emphasis on up-skilling teachers of English, Maths and Welsh (albeit to a lesser degree), which links into the National Literacy and Numeracy Programmes.
- 7.9 Consistent with an emphasis on improving the quality of teaching in English and Maths, staff in around a half of the schools we visited indicated that, over the course of the last academic year, they had recruited **additional teaching staff** into these Departments/Faculties. In most cases, such teachers had been used to either reduce class sizes, or to reduce the number of contact hours of experienced practitioners in order to deliver **catch-up interventions** for those pupils (often in Year 10 or 11) who were perceived as at risk of falling behind in their studies.
- 7.10 Although interviewees in those schools who had invested in additional staff (in teaching and non-teaching roles) were confident that these roles had supported an improvement in pupil outcomes, it is important to reflect on the sustainability of this, particularly where such roles have been funded through SCC funding (which must be spent by the end of 2015/16). However, it is worth considering the extent to which, in the context of many PtS schools, some *'quick-wins'* in the short-term may themselves be a pre-condition for improvement.
- 7.11 In-line with this finding, it is notable that around two-thirds of all Group A and B schools were found to have invested in additional teaching staff (those schools perceived to have been as stable or at risk of further decline). The proportion of Group C schools who had invested in this way was just over one-fifth (those schools perceived to be on a positive performance trajectory prior to inclusion in SCC). Such results invite further exploration and consideration of whether underpinning the

approaches adopted by SCC schools there is evidence of one or more identifiable model(s) of practice. We explore this in the next sub-section.

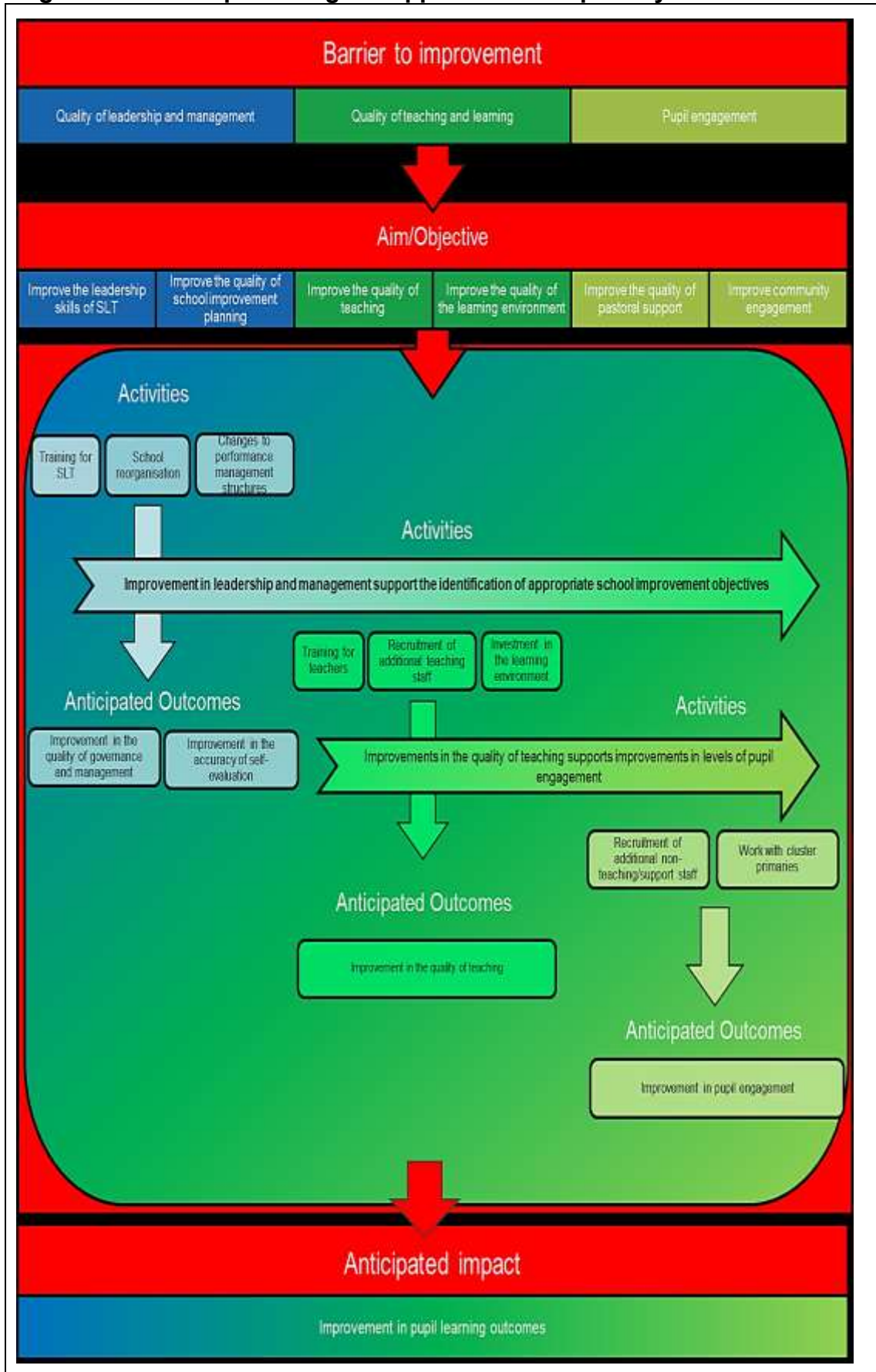
### **Conceptualising the approaches adopted by PtS schools**

- 7.12 It is clear that the approaches adopted by PtS schools have included a number of common elements including investment in self-evaluation processes, the skills of the Senior Leadership team, IT equipment to support the development of a modern learning environment and the recruitment of additional teaching and non-teaching/support staff. However, in practice, the level of investment in individual areas appears to have differed widely depending on differences in the perceived needs of the school.
- 7.13 In order to understand the choices made by individual PtS schools, it is important to reflect on the relationship between these different approaches/interventions and to acknowledge that while SDPs may comprise of a number of discrete elements, it may be the interaction between these elements that leads to the anticipated outcomes. For example, many PtS schools invested in additional support staff designed to support improvement in pupil engagement. Many of these schools also encouraged teachers to access CPD to support improvements in the quality of their practice. Although often considered as separate elements in their SDP, in reality (although often implicitly) interviewees have recognised their mutual interdependence. As stated by one Headteacher: *'if pupils aren't in school they can't learn'* (Headteacher, PtS School). To this one might well add that, even in class, a pupil is unlikely to engage fully if their teacher does not deliver a stimulating lesson.
- 7.14 In the way that PtS schools have chosen to conceptualise their SDP, it is also important to consider whether, in some instances, many of the outcomes sought by PtS schools are not only seen as interdependent but are positioned within a defined hierarchy. As reflected by one Headteacher: *'prior to SCC we simply couldn't trust the data we were collecting'* (Headteacher, PtS School). Without access to high quality self-evaluation data she indicated that it had been almost impossible to

identify which areas of teaching and learning needed to be improved such that school resources would be targeted appropriately.

7.15 Conceptualisation of the programme in this way (as summarised in Figure 7.1), potentially provides a powerful explanatory tool, but also raises a number of challenges for the ongoing assessment of the improvement of PtS schools. A brief explanation of the contents of the framework is provided in figure 7.1.

**Figure 7.1: Conceptualising the approaches adopted by PtS schools**



Source: SQW



### *Barriers to improvement*

7.16 Based on an analysis of the SDP plans, it appears that PtS schools have sought to address three principle barriers to improvement; the quality of leadership and management at their school, the quality of teaching and learning, and levels of pupil engagement.

### *Aims and Objectives*

7.17 In response to these broad areas of challenge, PtS schools have identified a range of school improvement objectives. The character of individual objectives has depended on the needs of individual schools and the preferences of Senior Leaders, but there are some commonalities.

- To support improvements in the quality of **leadership and management**, PtS schools have commonly sought to target the quality of existing policies and procedures in supporting self-evaluation and improvement planning and developments in the skills and competency of their Senior Leadership Team.
- To address issues relating to the quality of **teaching and learning** PtS schools have sought to explore opportunities to improve the quality of the learning environment (including the IT infrastructure) and the confidence, knowledge and pedagogical understanding of practitioners.
- Where pupil **engagement** has been identified as a challenge, many PtS schools have looked to improve the quality of the pastoral support available to pupils (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds).

7.18 In addition to work conducted in the school, such staff had frequently looked beyond the school-gate and worked with the wider community, whether directly with parents or alongside other local institutions (such as cluster primary schools).

### *Activities and Anticipated Outcomes*

7.19 PtS schools have often adopted a multifaceted approach including a wide range of school improvement activities. Nonetheless, analysis of the feedback from interviewees indicates the presence of a number of common approaches, many of which are highlighted in Figure 7.1. For example, to support improvements in the quality of teaching, many PtS schools have encouraged practitioners to access CPD courses and have recruited additional teaching staff (often in 'core' disciplines such as English and Maths) to reduce class sizes and allow for a wider range of catch-up interventions.

### *Theory of Change*

7.20 Undoubtedly, the intensity of activity supported by Senior Leaders is likely to differ depending on what they consider to be their school's most pressing school improvement priority. That said, underpinning the approach adopted by most, if not all, of the PtS schools we visited was the implicit assumption that the foundation of an effective school is a capable and highly motivated Senior Leadership Team. Although not always the case, this appears to be a precondition for more effective teaching and learning.

### *Anticipated Impact*

7.21 Consistent with overall programme-level guidance, interviewees assumed that by addressing their barriers to improvement, over time they would see an improvement in pupil learning outcomes.

### **Evaluating the progress of PtS Schools**

7.22 Although potentially providing a powerful tool through which to describe the approaches adopted by PtS schools, as suggested in the preceding section, the framework we have outlined highlights a number of challenges for evaluating the progress made by PtS schools.

- **Assessing the relative progress of different PtS schools:**

Undoubtedly, the key national performance outcome for PtS schools is the performance of pupils at Key Stage 4. However, as discussed

in Section 2, each PtS school started the programme on a different performance trajectory (and sometimes with a focus on different cohorts). In assessing the performance of individual schools over the course of the programme, it will be important to take this into account.

- **Acknowledging differences in the intermediate outcomes that might be expected in different PtS schools:** Preceding sections have highlighted the fact that, while PtS schools may have frequently chosen similar approaches to meet their school improvement objectives, the relative emphasis/intensity of activity has differed, depending on the perceived needs of individual schools. This has important implications for assessing the overall performance of an individual school's improvement strategy. For example, where a school has concentrated on improving the skills of its Senior Leaders, over the short term, it will be most appropriate to assess the performance of the strategy through consideration of evidence relating to the quality of leadership. Only over the medium-to long-term might one expect that an improvement in the competence of Senior Leaders would support improvements in teaching and learning in the school (and ultimately pupil learning outcomes).
- **Acknowledging the inter-dependence of school improvement activities in supporting improved outcomes:** As analysis has shown, PtS schools have commonly adopted a multi-faceted school improvement strategy. In seeking to identify which approaches are most effective in supporting improvement, it will be important to reflect on the inter-play between different activities. For instance, where the quality of teaching appears to have improved in a PtS school, it will be important to reflect on what other factors could have contributed to this outcome other than the introduction of a new CPD programme for example, the implementation of a more effective system for monitoring pupil progress which enabled teachers to target their interventions more effectively.

- **Considering the sustainability of a PtS school's improvement strategy:** This includes approaches aimed at directly supporting improvements in pupil learning outcomes, as well as those approaches adopted to improve the capacity of practitioners. Where schools have invested directly in supporting pupils (particularly those in Key Stage 4), and where interventions are effective and appropriately targeted, one would expect the learning outcomes of those pupils to improve. However, where a high level of investment in particular cohorts will not outlast the withdrawal of SCC funding, it will be important to review the suitability of this strategy and whether such an improvement in pupil outcomes is likely to be sustained.
- **Identifying appropriate outcome measures:** As illustrated in Figure 7.1, interviewees indicated that schools had identified a range of anticipated outcomes. While some of these are measurable, such as improved pupil attendance (with a reduction in the number of authorised/un-authorised absences taken by pupils over the course of an academic year), others are more difficult to quantify. For example, Estyn inspectors are responsible for assessing the quality of governance and management within a school and inspections are not always annual (except for schools in Special Measures where inspection is often termly). In such instances it will be difficult to accurately measure change over time, and so compare the progress of different schools.

## Section Summary: Approaches adopted by PtS schools

### Overcoming barriers to improvement

- In seeking to overcome their barriers to improvement, PtS schools have sought to respond (albeit to varying degrees) to one of three key priorities:
  - **Supporting improvements in the quality of leadership and management:** Staff in over four-fifths of the PtS schools we visited indicated that they had sought to undertake work in this domain. Strikingly, in most cases the emphasis has been placed on improving the quality of self-evaluation infrastructure, rather than on building the capacities of the Senior Leadership Team. Approaches included the introduction of a new data-tracking system or reforming existing performance management arrangements. However, this is likely to underestimate the contribution of Advisers in supporting/mentoring Senior Leaders in PtS schools.
  - **Improving pupil engagement:** In over two-thirds of the PtS schools Senior Leaders had looked to recruit additional support staff to improve pupil engagement (to mitigate the impact of deprivation on pupil attainment) and reduce the workload of teaching staff so they could concentrate on improving the quality of their practice. In many cases, staff have been recruited into pastoral roles, for example as an Attendance or Educational Welfare Officer.
  - **Supporting improvements in the quality of teaching and learning:** To support improvements in this area PtS schools appeared to have invested in both improving their IT infrastructure and the provision for additional CPD opportunities for practitioners.

### Conceptualising the approaches adopted by PtS schools

- Although PtS schools appear to have adopted a number of common approaches to overcome their barriers to improvement, in practice, levels of investment appear to have differed widely.
- To understand the approaches adopted by individual PtS schools, it is important to recognise that many of the discrete interventions supported by PtS schools will only achieve the desired outcomes in combination. Furthermore, the success of each PtS school is likely to depend on a realistic assessment of their level of need in each domain.
- Consideration of feedback from interviewees indicates that school improvement plans have often been developed in a way that assumes that the outcomes sought by PtS schools operate within a defined hierarchy, whereby improvements in pupil engagement can only be achieved over the long-term alongside improvements in teaching and learning. Equally implicit in the approaches adopted by many PtS schools is recognition that the identification of appropriate approaches in these areas, in some schools, would be dependent on improvements in the quality of leadership.

### Evaluating the progress of PtS schools

- Such insights pose a number of evaluative challenges.
  - **Assessing the relative progress of different PtS schools:** It will be crucial to take into account the different starting points of each PtS school in assessing the performance of the programme.
  - **Acknowledging the importance of intermediate outcomes:** Where different PtS schools have chosen to focus on different priorities it is important to acknowledge that, where possible, intermediate outcomes are identified that support an assessment of the effectiveness of activities. For example, where pastoral staff have been recruited to improve pupil engagement, an appropriate intermediate outcome may be the number of unauthorised absences recorded by target pupils each term.
  - **Considering the sustainability of a PtS school's improvement**

**strategy:** It is important to recognise that within the timeframe of the evaluation an improvement in pupil learning outcomes may not always be an effective measure of the overall long-term progress of a particular school.

## 8 Identifying emerging impacts of participation in Schools Challenge Cymru on PtS schools and next steps for the evaluation

- 8.1 In this section we consider the emerging impacts of participation in SCC on PtS schools and consider the implications of this for the next steps in the evaluation. In doing so, we are mindful of a number of factors, principally the realistic timeframe over which ‘hard’ outcomes, such as changes in the number of pupils achieving L2I, can be identified. Where schools have implemented interventions to support Year 11 pupils, one might expect to see in-year improvement. However, a realistic assessment of the effectiveness of the comprehensive strategy adopted by PtS schools is only likely to be realised over the course of a number of years.
- 8.2 In the short to medium-term, to assess the progress of PtS schools and the effectiveness of their school improvement strategy, it will be important to consider intermediate outcomes such as improvements in the quality of teaching, or pupil engagement. In adopting this approach, it is important to acknowledge that such outcomes may not be standardised and as such preclude direct comparison between different PtS schools. Our evaluation, instead, focuses on the progress made within each PtS school.

### Anticipated outcomes

- 8.3 As illustrated in the preceding section (see Figure 7.1 for a summary), interviewees indicated a range of different outcome measures by which they were looking to assess the performance of their school’s improvement strategy. Nonetheless, a number of common measures were identifiable.
- Senior Leaders in over half of the PtS clusters visited, 21 of 38, interviewees indicated that a key measure by which they would be looking to assess the progress made by the PtS school would be the **quality of leadership**. When asked how their school would be assessing progress in this area, most interviewees indicated that,

ultimately, they would rely on validation from Estyn of the judgement set out in their self-evaluation plan. It was noted that, for those schools in Special Measures, this was likely to provide a regular source of performance information (such schools are often visited on a termly basis). In most cases it was acknowledged that inspection visits were not likely to occur regularly enough to support the use of this measure within the school improvement cycle.

- As discussed above, given the inherent limitations of **pupil performance data** in providing an accurate short- or medium-term assessment of the progress of PtS schools, it is interesting that interviewees in around half of the PtS clusters visited noted that this was the key measure by which they were looking to assess progress. However, this decision is likely to be driven by a number of factors notably; the pressure on Senior Leaders to demonstrate progress against this measure (particularly at KS4), the availability of reliable (externally verified) test data from the National Reading and Numeracy Tests (sat by Year 2 through to Year 9 pupils since the summer term 2013) and (as demonstrated above) the lack of (reliable) alternative measures.
- Interviewees in just over one quarter of PtS clusters visited indicated that one of the primary outcome measures that they would be using to assess the progress made by their school were contextual indicators such as **pupil absence and exclusion rates**. While recognising the inherent limitations of this source, interviewees indicated that these were the most reliable year-on-year measures they had access to in assessing changes in pupil engagement.

### **Perceived impact of participation in SCC**

- 8.4 At the time of our fieldwork, interviewees noted that in most cases PtS schools were in the process of collating end-of-year performance data. As such, in most cases, quantifying the effect of school improvement activity was not yet possible. Having said this, the majority of interviewees indicated that they felt that participation in SCC had had a



positive impact on their school (the majority of staff in 32 of the 38 PtS clusters we visited). In the remaining six PtS clusters, interviewees were generally of the view that, whilst work was ongoing, it was too early to say what the impact of this would be.

- 8.5 During our fieldwork in each PtS cluster, different interviewees reflected on the performance of their school against a number of performance measures. Consistent with the overall emphasis placed by many PtS schools on improving the quality of leadership and management in their school, staff in just under two-fifths of the PtS clusters we visited (15 of the 38) indicated that, over the course of the last year, they had witnessed improvements in this area. As exemplified by one school, it was felt that following the first year of SCC, staff (at all levels) were much clearer on their role and responsibilities. It was felt that by clarifying lines of accountability through the senior and middle leadership teams, the school had been in a much better position to identify and then tackle issues related to teaching and learning.
- 8.6 Although interviewees noted that they did not yet have access to end-of-year performance information, in around one third of the schools we visited (13 of 38), staff noted that, over the course of the year, they had seen an improvement in internal pupil-tracking data (commonly collected on a termly basis). While still cautious about the accuracy of such information (many schools were seeking to strengthen their self-evaluation processes), interviewees indicated that apparent improvements in the (teacher assessed) attainment level of pupils was likely to be a solid indicator of the progress of the school as a whole.
- 8.7 Interviewees, in just over a quarter of the visited PtS schools, indicated that they felt that, following inclusion in SCC, they had seen an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. Such a finding could be considered somewhat surprising given the relatively small number of interviewees who indicated that this was one of the primary measures they would be using to assess the progress of their school (interviewees in just over a fifth – 9 of the 38 – of the PtS clusters visited indicated that this was the case). However, in reality, this is likely to reflect the challenges in accurately assessing improvements in this regard. Of

those interviewees who indicated that they would be assessing improvements in this domain, the most frequent approach adopted for doing this was through lesson observations. At the time in which we undertook our fieldwork, schools were reviewing the way that lesson observations were undertaken and moderating the judgements made by those leading them in order to improve the accuracy of their self-evaluation. It is likely that such data may, therefore, become more reliable over time within individual schools.

- 8.8 Given the nature of much of this performance information, quantifying (and indeed comparing), the progress made by PtS schools is challenging. Nonetheless, consideration of the feedback from interviewees provides some interesting insights. Key amongst these was the differing expectations of interviewees in different PtS schools. Such differences are perhaps best understood through consideration of the prior performance trajectory of PtS schools. In Group A schools (where quality of provision was diminishing prior to SCC), it is notable that few, if any, interviewees felt that, by the end of the first year, they were in any position to claim that there had been a demonstrable improvement in leadership and management at their school. In most cases, the emphasis appeared to be on stabilisation.
- 8.9 Conversely, in those that were commonly perceived to have been stable prior to inclusion in SCC, the emphasis on Year 1 appeared to be on ensuring that the building blocks were put in place to support the school in getting to a position in which pupil attainment levels would start to rise. In 14 of these 16 schools, interviewees indicated that they had seen an improvement in leadership and management at the school. Many felt that this had been integral to supporting an improvement in pupil learning outcomes (interviewees in 7 of 16 of these schools expected that the end of year results would show an improvement in pupil attainment).
- 8.10 In those schools, that were commonly perceived to be on a positive performance trajectory prior to inclusion in SCC, interviewees frequently considered inclusion in the programme as an opportunity to make '*accelerated progress*'. In most cases (9 of the 14 schools of this type)

the primary performance measure was considered to be on raising pupil attainment (particularly at Key Stage 4). In most cases, however, interviewees indicated that they would be waiting for the publication of end of year results before assessing whether the school had made progress in this regard.

- 8.11 These different targets have major implications for programme-level assessment. Through the final phase of the evaluation it will be important to consider the progress made by individual schools against their targets and, at programme level, explore whether it is more appropriate to consider the performance of each of the three identified types of PtS school independently rather than as a single group of 39 PtS schools.

### **Perceived sustainability of outcomes achieved**

- 8.12 Interviewees in PtS clusters were also asked to reflect on the sustainability of the outcomes achieved by PtS schools. Given the multi-faceted approach adopted by most PtS schools and the inter-dependence of different elements of each schools approach in achieving anticipated outcomes, interviewees reflected that this question was not an easy one to answer. In practice, interviewees in most of the PtS schools visited acknowledged that the approach adopted by the school included a number of activities that would support long-term improvements in the performance of the school, such as improvements in the quality of self-evaluation and *'quick-wins'* such as increased support for Year 10 and 11 pupils. As such, assessing the overall sustainability of the approach would depend on the success of individual measures, and the overall balance between *'long-term and short-term fixes'*. At this stage, it is therefore not surprising that interviewees were unable, in most cases, to come to an overall judgement.

### **Next steps for the evaluation**

- 8.13 Based on our findings to date, we propose a range of activities to be undertaken in 2016. These will support the production of a future report. Key activities should include:

- wave 2 of the ‘You and Your School Survey’
- catch-up interviews with strategic interviewees, in particular Challenge Advisers and SCC Link Officers
- visits to all PtS schools, including interviews with key stakeholders including Senior Leaders in each school and members of functioning AIBs
- a documentary review of all available school/programme level documentation
- an analysis of available school performance data using an extract from the National Pupil Database.

*Wave 2 of the ‘You and Your School Survey’*

8.14 In Wave 2, and to support a longitudinal analysis of the experience of those pupils who responded to the survey in 2015, we propose targeting the questionnaire at pupils at all 39 PtS schools in Year 7, Year 8 and Year 10. For ease of completion, we suggest that (as in 2015) the questionnaire is made available both online and on paper.

*Interviews with strategic individuals*

8.15 As in 2015, we propose undertaking catch-up meetings and interviews with strategic individuals. These will include:

- policy leads within the Welsh Government, to deepen our understanding of programme-level developments
- members of the Champions Group, to reflect on the emerging impacts of the programme
- Challenge Advisers, in order to ensure that we are aware of the progress made by PtS schools and reflect on the overall performance of the programme
- SCC Link Officers, to take account of the views of Consortia on the impact of the programme

- catch-up interviews with strategic individuals, in particular Challenge Advisers and SCC Link Officers.

*Visits to all PtS schools*

8.16 To support an assessment of the impact of SCC, we propose undertaking follow-up visits to all PtS schools. As in 2015, we will interview, where possible:

- members of the Senior Leadership Team at each PtS school
- attendees of AIB meetings
- Senior Leaders in cluster primary schools
- Senior Leaders in secondary partner schools.

8.17 Over the course of the visits we would reflect, in particular, on any changes in the approaches adopted by PtS schools to overcome their barriers to improvement, assess the progress made by PtS schools in achieving their school improvement objectives and consider the contribution of participation in SCC in helping PtS schools to improve.

*Review of school/programme-level documentation*

8.18 Building on data collected through our visits to PtS schools we would welcome the opportunity to undertake a review of all available school/programme level documentation. Key resources would include:

- each PtS school's development plan
- records covering expenditure of SCC funding.

*Analysis of school performance data*

Using an extract from the National Pupil Database we propose undertaking an assessment of the progress made by PtS schools in improving pupil learning outcomes following inclusion in SCC.

## **Section Summary: Identifying emerging impacts of participation in Schools Challenge Cymru on PtS schools and next steps for the evaluation**

### **Anticipated outcomes**

- Across the 38 PtS schools we visited, interviewees set out a broad range of measures that they would be using in order to assess the effectiveness of their school's improvement strategy. Nonetheless a number of common measures were identifiable.
  - **The quality of leadership and management:** In over half of the PtS schools we visited staff indicated that this was a key measure by which to assess their progress. However, in most cases interviewees indicated that they would ultimately be reliant on Estyn to provide an assessment of their progress. It was acknowledged that, in some cases, such a judgement was not likely to be available within the lifetime of SCC.
  - **Pupil learning outcomes:** There was recognition by interviewees that such data was only likely to provide for an accurate assessment of the outcome of school improvement work over the long-term. In the absence of other measures, staff in around half of the PtS schools we visited indicated that this would, nonetheless, be the key measure by which they would be looking to assess their progress.
  - **Pupil absence and exclusion rates:** In just over a quarter of the PtS schools we visited, such contextual measures were one of the primary measures by which schools would be looking to assess their progress, particularly as a proxy measure for levels of pupil engagement.

### **Perceived impact of participation in SCC**

- The majority of interviewees in 32 of the 38 PtS schools we visited indicated that they felt that participation in SCC had had a positive impact on their school.
- At the time of our fieldwork interviewees noted that they were still in the process of collecting end-of-year performance data. As such, quantifying the effect of school improvement activity was not possible.

### **Perceived sustainability of outcomes achieved**

- At this stage, interviewees found it difficult to assess the sustainability of outcomes achieved through participation in SCC. In most cases it appeared that schools had supported a range of activities focussed on achieving both short-term and long-term goals. In such circumstances it was noted that, ultimately, the sustainability of a school's approach was dependent not only on the relative balance of activity but also on the combined success of these.

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## Annex A: Research Design

This section discusses the approach adopted by the evaluation team in order to meet the aims of the study. The key research activities by strand are summarised in Table A.1.

**Table A.1: Key research activities by strand**

<b>Evaluation Activities</b>	<b>Description</b>
Documentary Review	Review of school-level documentation in January-February 2015
Strategic interviews	Interviews with strategic individuals in March-April 2015
School Visits	Visits to PtS schools in April-July 2015
Interviews with key stakeholders	Interviews with key stakeholders in each PtS cluster in June-July 2015
Pupil survey	A mixed-mode (paper and online) survey of pupils in PtS clusters in May-July 2015

Source: SQW

### Documentary Review

Between January and February 2015 we undertook a review of available school-level documentation, including, where available, for all 39 PtS schools:

- School on a Page
- SDP (or SCC Action Plan)
- Minutes from Accelerated Improvement Board Meetings.

In total 217 documents were reviewed. Such documents provided an insight into the approaches taken by PtS schools following their inclusion in SCC and were used to inform our discussions with key stakeholders in PtS clusters.

### Strategic Interviews

Initial stakeholder interviews, which took place in January-February 2015, were followed up by additional meetings in March-April 2015. We will undertake a further round of interviews in March-April 2016. Interviewees have included:

- Project Leads at the Welsh Government
- Members of the SCC Champions Group
- SCC Link Officers at each of the four Regional Educational Consortium
- All 12 SCC Challenge Advisers.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic guide. Where possible, meetings were undertaken face-to-face, but, in some cases, were undertaken by telephone. A total of 23 interviews were undertaken by the end of April 2015. These interviews were used to enrich our understanding of the programme, and the approaches adopted by PtS schools following their inclusion.

### **School Visits**

Between April-July 2015 we set out to visit all 39 PtS schools. In each school we looked to interview a range of different stakeholders including; the Headteacher, one or two Senior Leaders and the Chair of the School Governing Body. With support from each school's SCC Challenge Adviser we were able to undertake visits to 38 of 39 PtS schools. In one school, due the tragic loss of the Headteacher in the summer term it was decided to postpone the visit until the Autumn term 2015/16. Interviews were undertaken both singularly and in a discussion group format. The number of interviews undertaken with each stakeholder group is summarised in Table A.2.

**Table A.2: Number of interviews undertaken in 2014**

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>
Headteachers	38
Senior Leaders <sup>15</sup>	80
Chair of Governors	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>

Source: SQW

Interviews were undertaken using a semi-structured topic guide and, where possible, recorded. Qualitative analysis software<sup>16</sup> was used to code the responses and to support an accurate disaggregation of the views of sub-populations such as school leaders or practitioners.

### **Interviews with key stakeholders**

Alongside our visits to PtS schools interviews were undertaken with a range of other key stakeholders, principally other members of functioning Accelerated Improvement Boards and Senior Leaders in partner schools.

In total of the 38 schools we visited 37 had an AIB in place at the time of our visit. In all such cases membership of the AIB formally extended to a Senior Leader at a cluster primary school. However, engagement of Senior Leaders was found to differ markedly (often dependent on the prioritisation of cross-phase working by the board). Where levels of prior engagement were low, perhaps understandably, interviewers found it extremely difficult to schedule a meeting. In total we were able to complete around two-thirds of the target number of interviews with this group. Interviewers faced similar challenges in engaging Senior Leaders in other cluster primary schools. Again we were able to complete around two-thirds of the target number of interviews. Where possible interviews were undertaken face to face but also took place by telephone. The number of interviews undertaken with each stakeholder group is summarised in Table A.3.

<sup>15</sup>In some cases it is likely that some interviewees were middle rather than Senior Leaders

<sup>16</sup> Analysis was undertaken using MaxQDA.

Over the course of our fieldwork, it became evident that in some areas AIB meetings had been attended by representatives from Consortia rather than the Local Authority. Furthermore, in a number of instances one Local Authority representative was responsible for supporting a number of PtS clusters. In total we were able to interview a LA or SCC representative (as appropriate) for 33 of the 37 PtS schools we visited who had a functioning AIB. In two instances no LA representative was in place following a recent change in personnel. In a further two cases the named representative was unable to meet with us during the fieldwork period.

Of the PtS schools we visited, 23 of 38, were working with at least one partner school at the time of our visit. In total we were able to interview one or more Senior Leaders at a partner school for just over three-fifths of those PtS schools that had one. As above, in a number of cases Senior Leaders in partner schools were reluctant to engage in the research at the time of the fieldwork as their relationship with the PtS school was at an early stage. We anticipate a greater response rate in the second round of visits once collaborative arrangements have become more established.

**Table A.3: Number of interviews undertaken in 2014**

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>
Local Authority Representatives	26
Senior Leader at a cluster primary school (and member of an AIB)	26
Senior Leader at a cluster primary school (not a member of an AIB)	25
Senior Leader at a partner school	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>

Source: SQW

### **Pupil Survey**

The *You and Your School* survey was set up with the following aims:

- To pilot an approach to running a Pupil Voice survey. In addressing this aim, we felt that there was also a particular need to address questions relating to:

- whether or not schools would participate in whole cohort surveys of pupils
- the mode of completion (online or paper) schools would prefer
- the extent to which the medium of completion had any impact on pupil responses.
- Obtain pupils' views on a range of aspects of their school experience (including views on aspects of the SCC that affect them):
  - what, if anything, could such a survey tell the Welsh Government about the progress and impact of Schools Challenge Cymru?
  - Get a more systematic picture of how pupil views could be incorporated into school governance and used to support school improvement plans.

### **School participation**

The original survey was planned for the spring-term of 2014/15, but delays meant that the survey was actually conducted in the summer term of 2014/15. Since the survey was not going to all schools in Wales, but to targeted schools (those secondary schools getting support under Schools Challenge Cymru and their cluster primary schools), schools were recruited using a multi-stage approach:

- An initial email (in English and Welsh) to all in-scope schools (39 secondary and 253 primary schools) inviting them to participate in the research.
- A pdf of a letter (in English and Welsh) for schools to send to parents, informing them about the research, and providing an opt-out for those parents who do not want their child to take part in the survey.
- A CATI recruitment process<sup>17</sup> with schools, using both English and Welsh speakers (as appropriate).
- The collation of details from schools agreeing to participate to give information on:
  - the numbers of classes and pupils per cohort (important for the printing of paper surveys)

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<sup>17</sup> A computer assisted telephone interviewing system was used to support the recruitment process. This ensured that a consistent record was created for each participating school.

- preferred contact details for the school (including email addresses) so that anonymised and aggregated survey feedback could be sent directly to the school
- preferred time/dates for the links to the online surveys (or the postage of paper surveys) to be sent out.
- The collation of details from schools not agreeing to participate in order to understand their reasons for lack of participation.

Despite the late timing in the year, a total of 57 schools (including 19 of the 39 PtS schools and 28 primary schools) subsequently facilitated the participation of their pupils in the survey. A total of 3,918 responses were received to the survey; 802 from pupils in Year 6, 1,526 from pupils in Year 7 and 1,590 from pupils in Year 9. Reasons given for not participating related primarily to:

- the **timing** of the survey, with the majority of non-participating schools saying that lessons were already fully planned and (in secondary schools) that staff were too busy preparing, invigilating, marking or moderating school and/or external examinations
- the perceived **relevance** of the survey to their school; primary schools in particular thought that, given the link with Schools Challenge Cymru, the survey did not relate to them
- the **subject matter**, with some schools stating that their pupils would not be interested in providing their views on school.

To support the evaluation of the performance of PtS schools analysis of the aggregated pupil responses was complemented by consideration of hypothesised school type (as discussed above using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data PtS schools were assigned to one of three groups depending on their prior performance trajectory). In interpreting this analysis, it is important to raise a note of caution due to the number of schools (and hence pupils) that took part:

- Three of the eight schools assigned to Group A took part accounting for just over one-tenth (339) of the pupils who responded to the survey.
- Just under two-fifths of the pupils who responded to the survey were from Group B schools (1,100). Responses were received from eight of the 16 Group B schools.

- Just over half of the responses we received were from pupils in Group C schools. Eight of the 14 schools assigned to this Group took part.

It is likely, therefore, that the respondents may not have been representative. Firstly, there may be an element of response bias at school level (five of the schools in this category chose not to administer the survey). Secondly, there may be some selection bias (pupil responses were received from a mean of 68 pupils per school, per cohort, suggesting that only some classes and/or some pupils were asked to take part).