Central South Wales Challenge: What does a self-improving system look like?

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Background, aims and methodology

Improving education is a key feature of the policy agenda in Wales. This includes both raising attainment overall and ensuring that the system enables all learners to fulfil their potential, irrespective of their background or circumstances. In order to achieve this, radical changes are proposed to the way the system operates. This includes a reappraisal of the way schools are supported. The four Regional Consortia are expected to take the lead in this work. However, structural change is one element in a new system and it is expected that the way services will be delivered will also change. This is evident in the way the Central South Consortium (CSC) proposes to work in future.

In January 2014 the CSC launched the Central South Wales Challenge, an initiative to raise standards across all schools in the region. Specifically the challenge was designed to stimulate the sharing of expertise amongst schools.

In October 2014 the Welsh Government set out in 'Qualified for Life'[1] its education improvement plan. It stated its vision as: 'that learners in Wales will enjoy teaching and learning that inspires them to succeed, in an education community that works cooperatively and aspires to be great, where the potential of every child and young person is actively developed' (p.4). In order to achieve this vision it set out its four strategic objectives, including 'Leaders of education at every level working together in a self-improving system, providing mutual support and challenge to raise standards in all schools' (p.5).

The Central South Wales Challenge is a good example of a self-improving system, already initiated and in its early days of delivery, as described in 'Qualified for Life'.

In January 2015 CSC commissioned NFER to help to develop practice with schools and to share learning across the system. This was to be undertaken by addressing the key questions outlined below:

- What progress has been made in the development of a self improving school system, at a system level, in terms of what has been done so far, and how it has been done?

- To what extent are stakeholders engaged with the changes?

- To what extent have the necessary structures and processes been established e.g. opportunities for peer review, hubs and partnership working?

- What is working well and what needs to be developed further?

- What is the impact on teaching and learning so far as a result of school to school work and what is the evidence?

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[1] http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/141001-qualified-for-life-en.pdf

- What are the outcomes of the changes, especially on those of children receiving free school meals?

- What are the barriers, and opportunities to progression?

The school collaboration developed by CSC has a number of different strands including:

- School Improvement Groups (SIGs) where schools have been allocated into groups across the consortium, crossing local authority boundaries; the SIGs have developed their own activities designed to promote school improvement; some of them have established sub-groups ('SIGLETS') to take forward specific aspects of the work.

- The Pathfinder Schools involve schools working in pairs, where one with an identified record of success works with another to provide peer review and other support designed to raise performance

- HUB schools, where schools with recognised good practice have delivered training to others,.

The evaluation of these activities has two distinct elements:

- a baseline review (Spring 2015) involving scoping discussions with representatives of CSC and a small number of expert stakeholders and five half-day focus group discussions with headteachers across CSC, leading to an Interim Report.

- Further discussions with strategic respondents and expert stakeholders, and a second round of focus group discussions with headteachers across CSC in early 2016.

This interim report provides a summary of the main themes that emerged from the discussions with key stakeholders and school leaders held in March-April 2015.

1 Interim findings

This chapter outlines the interim findings, based on the outcomes of the discussions with headteachers and senior stakeholders who attended the focus groups that were convened during the spring and early summer 2015. They are grouped according to the key research questions identified by CSC.

1.1 What progress has been made in the development of a self improving school system at a system level, in terms of what has been done so far, and how it has been done?

Stakeholders from across Central South Wales, including Directors of Education, Challenge Advisors and headteachers observed that maintaining the status quo had not been an option for their region given the scale of the challenges faced by schools and the need to strengthen the way they were supported. Directors described what they believed had been a lack of consistency in the past with evidence of duplication in the work of the local authorities and the consortia. This had convinced officers and elected members of the need for change. Similar messages were conveyed by the headteachers, many of whom had clearly lost confidence in the previous system and who echoed the Directors' comments about a lack of consistency in terms of support. Some felt that the quality of Challenge Advisors had been variable in the past.

The Challenge Advisors for their part noted that they had been under pressure as they sought to provide support to all schools. They indicated that in future they are likely to concentrate their efforts on those schools which were identified as Red or Amber in the National Categorisation, in order to target their support to the schools requiring greatest intervention. This means that a school-to-school model of support will be central to the way schools improve in future.

There was general acknowledgement that the concept of a school-led system offered an appropriate way forward. Some individual authorities had encouraged school-to-school collaboration in the past (though on a much smaller scale) and this had helped foster a professional dialogue, especially at headteacher level. Interestingly, many of those headteachers who were playing a proactive role in the SIGs are from those authorities or have worked in schools there before taking up their current posts.

There was a general awareness amongst the Directors and the active participants (in SIGs, Pathfinder Pairings, and Hubs) that schools are taking ownership of school improvement and that capacity building at that level is the right way forward. The structures have been put in place e.g. allocating schools to SIGs, creating the Pathfinder Pairings, and promoting the provision by Hub schools. The most negative

comments came from a very small minority who felt that the SIGs had been rushed into place and that they were unwieldy, compared to the Pathfinder Pairings.

1.2 To what extent are stakeholders engaged with the changes?

1.2.1 Engagement with the philosophy underpinning these changes

Directors recognised that they will need to 'let go' in order for this system to be led by schools. They acknowledged that this required a 'complete shift' in their thinking about the way schools were supported in terms of methodology, approach and direction. Although they recognised the impetus that was being given to a school-led model by the Welsh Government and Estyn, among others, the direction for change also came from the LAs themselves who felt that there is a need to change the practices used in the past.

There was a strong feeling, especially at strategic level, that it is important to ensure that schools are aware of the moral purpose behind the work they are doing, and the system's responsibility for the success of all schools and learners. Furthermore, they said that school collaborations need to represent a genuinely different way of working rather than approaching this as another initiative.

Challenge Advisors agreed with the need to change the philosophy. They emphasised that the model has to be truly school-led if it is going to work, a view that was shared by headteachers who stressed that expertise rested in schools and that they can learn a great deal from each other. As one primary SIG headteacher noted 'I felt in the past, so much has been top-down and this [the school-led model] is the way you do it'. The secondary SIG group representative also believed that the SIG approach has been effective because it has forced schools to work together and collaborate.

Headteachers believed that the approach being developed in CSC allowed them to develop their own agenda and focus on issues which they themselves have identified, not those which stemmed from national priorities and initiatives, with the focus set elsewhere. As a headteacher involved with the primary SIG group noted, this was an opportunity 'to be able to look at something that you want to look at and develop your school ... as opposed to being told this is the direction of travel and this is what you have to do'.

1.2.2 Engagement with the school-to-school work

Estimating the level of engagement in the practice of the various models of school-to-school working was not easy given that the evidence is wholly qualitative and in some cases tentative, and while this project does collect the views of school leaders, it has not been able to capture the perspective of other practitioners, such as

classroom teachers. Moreover, there was evidence of variation in the extent to which headteachers had engaged with the process.

Directors of Education referred to a range of responses that varied from full engagement, compliance, surface engagement and cynicism. They felt that a group of headteachers across the region are involved and are the 'movers and shakers' in the collaborative work. Headteachers of the hub schools tended to agree and felt that too much of the engagement is currently limited to the enthusiastic supporters who have benefited from hub working. Representatives of secondary SIGs indicated that there are differences in the extent to which practitioners have engaged and that there are 'leaders, followers, and watchers'. They felt that there has been an initial period of activity which needed to maintain momentum. Their views were echoed by primary school SIG groups who acknowledged that some have not engaged for very good reasons (such as an impending Estyn inspection), but that this may mask the fact that the SIG work was not a priority for some of their colleagues.

They believed this partly reflected the way some members are more engaged than others, and to some extent, this may be due to other pressures on time. This emphasises the amount of work which remains to be done to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for the new way of working among schools.

1.2.3 Promoting engagement

The need to nurture participation was emphasised by respondents. They felt that it had been beneficial that consortia representatives had made direct contact with the schools to promote the idea of working in the various groups. At the same time Directors felt that the consortium-wide launch event had been particularly beneficial. Hub school representatives said that they had been able to build on existing relationships which has prompted engagement with what was offered.

However, issues such as the quick pace of reform and the limited time which schools have had to adapt to the new system was a matter of concern. This was reflected by Hub school headteachers and also by those involved in Partnership Pairings who noted the need to spend time building the one-to-one relationships.

The secondary SIG group suggested a 'plus one' system whereby schools would be requested to send substitute representatives to SIG meetings who would be fully briefed about what participation entailed. Another suggestion was that a lead school should be designated the fundholder and that money would then be released to schools depending on the extent to which they engage with the work.

1.3 To what extent have the necessary structures and processes been established e.g. opportunities for peer review, hubs and partnership working?

1.3.1 Establishing collaborative structures

Respondents described the processes by which they had been allocated to their respective groups (allocation into SIGs, the selection of Pathfinder Pairings, the selection of Hub schools etc). They felt that the randomised nature of the SIG groups and the fact that schools were drawn from across different local authority areas was beneficial because the schools are not in direct competition. Additionally, they reported that they are often working with schools with which they might not have come in contact in the past. They believed that they had broadened their horizons by seeing work in other schools, especially those in different authorities.

SIG groups had mixed views about the support they had received at the point at which they were set up. The primary SIG group was glad that they had the freedom to develop their own approaches, whereby they could set things up and be left to get on with the work. Those at the secondary SIG group thought that they needed terms of reference so that the work they did was given a focus.

Those involved in the Pathfinder Pairings considered that the process of selection had been fair and based on accurate data. This had helped those schools to make progress by having a thorough professional dialogue with their peers and developing the confidence to do so.

Those involved in SIG groups said that they had established sub-groups, including a network of deputy headteachers who had led on a specific aspect of the work. This had proved to be an excellent professional network, and had been a good place for them to share their experiences and establish their own links.

It was noted that Welsh medium schools had some experience of working together and that in some instances the links between them were longstanding. They had been allocated to SIGs alongside English-medium schools. This was welcomed by schools in the English-medium sector who felt that they benefited from the input of their colleagues and noted that they were dealing with the same range of issues (teaching and learning, school leadership, discipline etc). As was noted by one primacy SIG headteacher, 'leadership is leadership ... the processes you go through are the same'.

Challenge Advisors indicated that schools varied in terms of their readiness for this kind of collaboration. They noted that some lack the confidence to do it and that there was a need to nurture them and develop their skills.

1.3.2 Bureaucracy

Respondents agreed that the bureaucracy involved with the system had been kept to a minimum. However, concerns were expressed about the amount of administrative work which was left to the schools themselves (such as contacting others in a SIG and setting up meetings) which was made more difficult because some of the contact details were inaccurate or out of date.

1.3.3 Supporting the structures

Stakeholders across the respondent groups felt that it was important that the consortium was involved in the work, especially in terms of providing the day-to-day administrative support that they required. For example it was noted that Challenge Advisors had a great deal of intelligence about schools that could be used when brokering partnerships.

Challenge Advisors felt they should be more involved in the work of identifying and verifying good practice through systems designed to monitor and evaluate good practice, and that this work remained underdeveloped. One of their suggestions was that a dataset of good practice could be set up.

1.3.4 Funding

The amount of funding available to support the work was commented on, especially by members of the secondary SIG group. The funding for initiatives in England (such as London Challenge and Manchester Challenge) was seen as something on a much larger scale, and some insisted that it was unrealistic to expect a transformation in performance unless significant resources were invested in the work.

1.4 What is working well and what needs to be developed further?

1.4.1 Working in groups of schools

Headteachers suggested that the work in which they were involved through the SIGs was more focused than other collaborative efforts, such as the PLCs. Although a small number of those previous opportunities were seen to have worked well, headteachers suspected that they had not provided the robust framework for professional development that had been envisaged when the model was set up.

Because the leadership of the SIG groups is down to headteachers, some primary SIG groups felt that initially they had little sense of what they were trying to achieve and things had taken time to embed. In response to this issue they had been given a fairly prescriptive range of issues to consider to help them identify what they should be doing. Later still, the work done by the external consultant Mark Hadfield built on this giving them them more freedom to develop their own work while retaining a focused approach.

1.4.2 Harnessing school expertise

The Hub representatives felt that the notion of schools developing as centres of excellence was a radical change in culture for schools in the region because the training was led by schools rather than the LA or consortium, something which the headteachers welcomed. There was a widespread view that those delivering training

needed to be credible (a view shared across the different respondent groups). This echoed the views of Challenge Advisors who emphasised the importance of ensuring that good practice was identified objectively and verified appropriately.

Schools perceived that the expertise they accessed from other schools was more up to date than that which they had been able to access in the past from some of the training that had been offered. They felt that this system enabled them to see things working in the classroom setting. At the same time, it highlighted the pockets of excellence that exist in schools.

The discussions suggested that Hub schools were keen to share their practice with others and there was strong support across the various groups of headteachers to the idea of forming a network of schools to demonstrate and share resources and ideas. However, it is not evident whether schools have always verified their 'good' practice on the basis of evidence. This suggested there is a need to establish a robust system for identifying and exchanging 'what works' both in terms of subject specific knowledge and school improvement issues more broadly.

The Hub schools talked about delivering courses, and some were thinking about the viability and cost-effectiveness of doing so. A comment typical of one viewpoint was that schools should 'keep [their] courses generic to attract as many people as possible'. This was despite the fact that some serious criticism of the previous system was that it had concentrated too much on providing generic, and rather bland, courses which staff attended but which had little impact on practice in schools.

Schools involved in the Pathfinder Pairings found the model of support through paired work was very effective. Indeed, many of them felt that it was the most effective form of collaboration in which they had been involved. Those involved in Pathfinder Pairings felt they benefit from having more guidance than others when starting out. These experiences reflected the way schools currently have limited experience to 'take ownership' and 'drive forward' the school improvement agenda.

1.4.3 Focus of the work

Once they have established priorities schools have focused on literacy and numeracy and pedagogy. The activities have included conducting book reviews; learning walks; the use of assessment for learning; looking at evidence of what represents a good lesson; considering what prevents lessons from being good; and how teaching can be improved to move from good to excellent. Others looked at issues relating to behaviour in schools. Leadership (including specific aspects like supporting middle leaders) and the use of technology to support teaching and learning have also been important elements of the work. Some have looked at evidence of good practice and what interventions work but the extent and robustness of their assessments were not always clear.

1.4.4 Overall

Overall, schools felt that the work in which they have been involved is increasing professional autonomy. However, they expressed concern that capacity within

schools is variable. Other respondents also described the 'fluidity' of the system given that the departure of one or two excellent practitioners could have a serious impact on a school's performance. Others warned that the cost of engaging in such work can not be ignored.

Directors were concerned about the capacity within school leadership to lead on school improvement issues alongside other demands and matters such as the ability and willingness of schools to release practitioners, something which was especially acute in small schools. In particular, releasing headteachers and their deputies was viewed as a significant problem. Pathfinder Pairing schools referred to issues around geography and travel time, although these were not considered to be overly negative factors. One suggestion to overcome such practical issues was to arrange 'block' periods when people are not required to be in school so they can go off site or can devote time to the work with another school.

Individual evaluation work was being done (and had been commissioned by CSC). At the same time, early monitoring and evaluation processes are in place to measure progress against objectives, such as those outlined in School Development Plans (SDPs). These need to be developed further, owned from within SIGs, and should work to a systematic evaluative framework.

In addition, while there was some evidence from the discussions with focus group participants that they have 'bought into' the new system envisaged by the Consortium, there was limited evidence at this stage that this has developed into whole-school approaches, with the required buy-in from the staff. Indeed, it has to be recognised that the focus groups would not be able to provide robust evidence either way.

1.4.5 Moving forward

Respondents were keen to move forward with the work. Suggestions include developing the work of SIG sub-groups (possibly extending the SIGLET model), by focusing on individual projects such as:

- dealing with low-level disruptive behaviour

- conducting school-to-school departmental reviews.

They felt strongly that there should be a practical focus on issues such as developing the teaching and learning and that a 'no blame' culture was needed where practitioners could be confident when taking a risk.

In order to ensure that a robust system is developed, CSC could consider establishing a template of what an effective school-led system should look like. This could include expectations such as:

- All senior/middle leaders, teachers and support staff engage in and attend external/internal meetings (e.g. at subject/departmental level).

- Staff at all levels are proactive about ways to take forward school improvement e.g. by researching evidence of what works, or having self improvement as an item on departmental meeting agendas.

- Each school and SIG has an action plan agreed by all.

- School action plans are linked to the SDP.

- There are clear success criteria, based on two or three achievable school objectives.

- There is an agreed system in place to record progress.

- There is a programme in place to build capacity.

- School governors understand the process and are engaged in the task of monitoring outcomes.

- Staff are engaged in teacher enquiry, and joint practice development.

- Practitioners actively ask where the evidence is that an approach works when engaging with practitioners in other schools.

They felt that there was a need to pose key questions such as the extent to which the work was leading to reflective practice and nurturing the professional conversations. Respondents suggested collecting data about individual learners in order to measure impact.

Others wanted to establish clearer and closer links with schools' SDPs (which they felt was not always the case at present) and they suggested there iss also a need to focus on leadership and how it could be strengthened.

1.5 What is the impact on teaching and learning so far as a result of school-to-school work and what is the evidence?

Respondents felt that there was a growing impetus to share and collaborate. Indeed, some indicated that the impact of the work to date had been felt more in terms of processes and the professional conversations that has been initiated, rather than more concrete outcomes. For example one Challenge Adviser observed that people are more willing to engage with other schools than had been the case in the past. The work was also seen as something which has broken down barriers between authorities. The SIGs were credited with having prompted a meaningful dialogue around professional issues. The collaboration has given staff opportunities to examine what others were doing and to think through how ideas could be tailored to suit their own circumstances.

CSC is itself monitoring the work of each strand of activities based on feedback from the participating schools and Challenge Advisors' reports. These cite qualitative evidence and some quantitative data that suggest that schools that have taken part in SIG activities and those in pathfinder partnerships have made progress during 2014-15:

- They provide data on improvements in end of year assessments, especially the percentages achieving the expected outcomes and the Core Subject Indicator (CSI).

- Evidence of progress for identified groups such as More Able and Talented (MAT).

- They cite positive impact on the development of school leadership capacity.

In addition, the reports refer to the positive impact of the introduction of tools such as the Excellence in Teaching Framework.

In some cases, the progress to which the internal monitoring refers has exceeded 10 per cent on the previous year and in other individual cases the improvement has been greater still.

This is in a context where, as was reported to the National Assembly's Education Committee:

> schools in the Central South region again improved their outcomes [in 2015] significantly setting a three year consistent upward trend of improvements at rates greater than the national rates of improvement' (CSC briefing, 2015).

This includes higher than average increases in the percentage of pupils who achieved the expected level at the Foundation Phase, Key Stage 2, and Key Stage 3 and increases in the percentage achieving the Level 2 inclusive threshold at GCSE.

At the same time, there were individual examples of impact such as the way that collaboration has strengthened schools' work around literacy and numeracy, and work which had been done to develop restorative justice in schools.

However, these interim findings have to be treated with caution given that it is impossible to attribute any improvement directly and solely to schools' participation in the collaborative work and not all of the progress to which the reports refer is quantified (or quantifiable). Even so, CSC's evidence does highlight that the direction of travel is positive and that some of the schools which it has highlighted have made substantial progress which offers a promising basis for future work.

This was acknowledged by the various stakeholders who took part in the focus groups. They recognised that they are a long way from being able to measure the impact of the work they have been doing on whole-school systems. Some are using a method of continuum (where they had set out the progress they expected to make by a set period of time) to look at where they are as a result of taking part in particular activities.

Similarly, respondents believed that it was difficult to measure impact on pupils saying that there is not sufficient information to measure it yet. While there are early positive signs, the new systems of working and processes are far from embedded. This view was shared by both headteachers and Challenge Advisors. Some believed that the picture will become clearer next year.

2 Summary and next steps

Overall, there was consensus among the various groups of stakeholders that change was required in CSC and that a school-led model of improvement is the right direction of travel. It offers a new way of working and capacity building that is grounded in the reality of schools' expertise and which draws on practitioners' talents. There was certainly evidence of enhanced professional dialogue and engagement with the philosophy of a school-led model among school leaders and those with a strategic role in the system. Engagement with the various forms of collaborative structures (especially in the SIGs) was seen to be influenced by factors such as school capacity (a theme that was emphasised regularly) and other pressures. Even so, it was clear that schools are willing to make a commitment to the notion of working together. For example, school leaders were very positive about the notion of working in pairs and with other practitioners more generally. Moreover, the processes have encouraged reflection among practitioners about the direction that future work should look like, topics for enquiry, and issues relating to schools' journeys of improvement.

To date, engagement has been largely at headteacher or senior leader level and there is little evidence about whether a broader range of practitioners have engaged with the process and what impact it has made on schools more broadly. There is also a need to consider how the impact of a reformed system will be monitored and evaluated in future and how quality assurance systems will be put in place.

The evidence collected by CSC demonstrates the potential of its own monitoring and evaluation systems to gather information about the progress of different school-led improvement groupings and their impact. The evidence suggests that:

- the internal monitoring system offers potential as a means of capturing what is happening on the ground

- it needs to be systematic, collecting the same information from all schools and groupings of schools, to enable comparisons between individual schools and groups working together

- it has to be systemised, with all Challenge Advisers (or equivalent postholders) collecting the information in the same way and to the same extent

- it needs to be rigorous, collecting robust quantitative and qualitative information.

One additional avenue to consider would be whether a template of expectations could be introduced, that could outline a range of expectations such as those presented in the table below:

Table 1:   Possible statements of expectations

All senior/middle leaders and teachers and support staff engaged and attend

external/internal meetings (e.g. at subject/departmental level).

Staff at all levels are proactive about ways to take forward school improvement e.g. by researching evidence of what works, or having self improvement as an item on departmental meeting agendas.

Each school and SIG has an action plan agreed by all.

School action plans are linked to the SDP.

There are clear success criteria, based on two or three achievable school objectives.

There is an agreed system in place to record progress etc.

There is a programme in place to build capacity.

School governors understand the process and are engaged in the task of monitoring outcomes.

Staff are engaged in teacher enquiry, and joint practice development.

Practitioners actively ask where is the evidence that an approach worked when engaging with practitioners in other schools.

Developing such an understanding of expectations will be essential if CSC is to understand whether the potential of its new way of working is being maximised and what impact it is having on the way schools are led, the way practitioners work and what learners achieve.

NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

- independent
- insights
- breadth
- connections
- outcomes