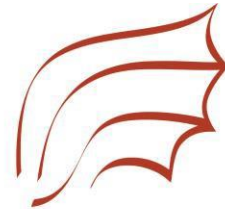Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

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

**ERW Consortium
College Road
Carmarthen
Carmarthenshire
SA31 3EQ**

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by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

Context

Regional profile

ERW provides school improvement services for a region of six local authorities: Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire, Powys and Swansea.

The number of pupils of compulsory school age in 2015 was 101,527. This represents 28% of all pupils in Wales. There are 513 maintained schools in the region, 32% of all maintained schools in Wales (PLASC, 2015).

The percentage of pupils of compulsory school age who are eligible for free school meals is 17.5%, which is lower than the national figure of 18.8%. This level of eligibility is the second lowest of the four regional consortia (PLASC, 2015).

In the region, 24% of people aged three and over say that they can speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 19% (2011 Census, ONS).

As of 31 December 2015, ethnic minorities account for 4% of the population in the region and this is similar to the Wales average.

As of 31 March 2015, 1,515 children in the region are looked after by a local authority and this represents 27% of looked-after children in Wales.

Performance profile

Overall, pupils' outcomes at key stage 4 are the highest in Wales. The rate of improvement in pupils' outcomes in South West and Mid Wales in nearly all indicators at key stage 4 has been around the average rate of improvement across Wales over the last three years. However, underneath the regional figures there is a wide variation in outcomes between the six local authorities. Since 2012, the proportion of primary, secondary and special schools being judged good or better for their standards when inspected is lower than that across Wales.

Over the last three years, teacher assessed outcomes in the Foundation Phase have increased at a faster rate than that across Wales. At key stage 2, teacher assessed outcomes are similar to those across Wales. Performance compared to that of similar schools in Wales is about average in both these stages.

The proportion of pupils gaining the expected level in the core subject indicator at key stage 3 has increased at a similar rate to that across Wales over the last three years. Performance compared to that of similar schools in Wales is lower than average.

In 2015, at key stage 4, the proportion of pupils achieving the level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics is the highest across the four regional consortia. Performance on this indicator has been strong for the last three years. However, there is a large variation between the local authorities, which is evident in the benchmark targets set by the Welsh Government. In 2015, three of the six local authorities are below their targets while two are well above them.

The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved at a similar rate to that across Wales over the last three years. In 2015, the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals who achieve the level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics is the highest of the four regional consortia. The proportion of boys who achieve the level 2 threshold including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics is the highest of the four regions. Despite this, the gap in performance between boys and girls is the widest in Wales because girls perform particularly well.

Over the last three years, performance in the average capped wider points score has increased at a slightly faster rate than that across Wales. In 2015, performance in this measure is the highest of the four regional consortia. Performance compared to Welsh Government benchmark targets for this measure illustrates a large variation between the six local authorities.   Comparisons with similar schools across Wales are better than average on the whole for this measure, although this is largely due to the strong performance by two local authorities in the region.

Performance in the level 1 threshold has improved at a faster rate than across Wales over the last three years and was the highest performance in Wales in 2015.

The proportion of pupils achieving five A* or A grades at GCSE or equivalent has remained fairly steady over the last three years. In 2015, the proportion of pupils achieving this measure is the strongest in Wales.

At key stage 4, over the last three years, performance in English has improved at a faster rate than across Wales as a whole. In 2015, performance compared to that of similar schools in Wales is average.   The rate of improvement in mathematics over this time has not been as fast as that in English across the region, although it is broadly in line with the rate of improvement across Wales. In 2015, performance compared to t h a t o f similar schools in Wales is slightly better than average.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure that school improvement services address the performance of schools causing concern, particularly in the secondary sector

R2 Ensure that planning for education improvement clearly integrates local and regional priorities, so that ERW and local authority plans are complementary and contain actions that are specific and measurable, with appropriate milestones for delivery

R3 Ensure that the work of the main boards and working groups is recorded carefully and consistently, so that concerns, decisions and actions are clear, auditable and fully costed, and that they enable leaders to monitor progress

R4 Refine the framework for assessing value for money so that all relevant costs across the six authorities are taken into account fully when set against outcomes

Main findings

Support for School Improvement: Good

ERW knows most of its schools well. ERW's framework for supporting schools to improve, which it terms the 'ladder of support', sets out clearly how it will work with schools to help them to improve, and this is understood by schools. ERW's approach to school improvement work is based on useful standard activity with every school alongside a suitably proportionate degree of additional support, monitoring or   intervention based on the individual needs of each school.

Challenge advisers visit every school at least twice a year. The first visit follows a helpful, common structure in all schools.   In most cases, advisers challenge school leaders robustly about the school's performance, provision and leadership and agree appropriate priorities for support for the year ahead. As a result, ERW categorises schools appropriately.   In a few cases, challenge advisers are too generous in their judgements about schools and miss important areas for improvement in the school.

During the second visit, challenge advisers monitor a school's progress, and this work is rigorous in most cases.   The approach to this second visit is more flexible and bespoke than the first and takes good account of the categorisation of the school and the particular areas for improvement.

In schools causing concern, ERW sets up formal groups to monitor closely the school's progress and ensure that work to support the school is coordinated. These groups are usually effective. In most cases, ERW provides local authorities with enough information to support their use of statutory powers of intervention in schools that are causing concern. Schools causing concern often make good progress in the region.   Although a few secondary schools do not make good progress, the reasons for this are, in part, a matter for the relevant local authorities to address rather than the regional school improvement service.

ERW supports local authorities to agree suitable statutory targets for performance at the end of key stages in every school. ERW does not set other targets with all schools. However, other specific targets are often used effectively with schools identified for intensive support.

ERW collects and analyses a wide range of relevant data at pupil and school level. It produces helpful data packs that support the work of challenge advisers, other school improvement staff and local authority officers. In addition, challenge advisers work well with, and take good account of information about schools from, local authority services, such as additional learning needs, wellbeing, human resource, governor and financial services.

The quality and availability of school improvement services are equitable to primary, secondary and special schools and through the medium of Welsh and English. ERW effectively engages in supporting schools involved in the Schools Challenge Cymru initiative. Challenge adviser work with PRUs is generally less effective than with mainstream schools.   Challenge advisers usually work well with governing bodies.

Challenge advisers, who are employed by individual local authorities, and other school improvement staff receive a useful induction programme when they join ERW as well as good ongoing training and support.   Challenge advisers are deployed appropriately in the region despite being employed by individual local authorities.

Over the last year, most reports that ERW provides to Estyn prior to school inspections or monitoring visits show a sound understanding of a school's strengths and areas for improvement.   In the previous year, Estyn had significant concerns with around a third of reports.   The recent improvement in the quality of reports reflects thorough work within ERW to ensure that challenge advisers work to expected standards.   The consortium now has strong quality assurance processes in place for the work of its challenge advisers and other school improvement staff.

In most schools, ERW successfully provides or brokers suitable support to address areas for improvement. ERW provides good support and guidance for schools in key areas such as learning and teaching, Foundation Phase, core subjects, literacy, numeracy, statutory assessment, qualification changes and school leadership.

ERW uses its knowledge of good practice well to broker a significant amount of school-to-school support, which usually works successfully. Through the work of challenge advisers and other school improvement staff, ERW has a good grasp of where good practice exists in the region, be it at whole school level or just a particular aspect of a school's work, such as in one curriculum area, even if the school as a whole is not performing well.

Challenge advisers monitor whether or not schools are compliant in their use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant. Advisers provide beneficial guidance to schools on appropriate uses of the funding. However, ERW's evaluation of the impact of funding on learners' standards is limited.

ERW has good systems for recording information about their work with, and evaluations of, schools. These systems enable leaders to monitor and assure the quality of the work undertaken by challenge advisers and other staff who challenge and support schools to improve.

ERW has analysed information well to understand concerns about teacher and leadership recruitment and retention.   ERW is planning appropriately to address these concerns and is engaged in further research to inform future planning.

Leadership: Good

The six local authorities in this region have together established a strong identity for ERW. They have agreed to work together in alliance to improve all schools within the region. The work of ERW is governed by a legal agreement which clearly sets out the purpose of the alliance, and what is expected of all parties and, in particular, their respective contribution to resourcing and managing ERW's work. As a consequence of this joint working, there has been improved support and challenge to schools within the region, with more consistent collection and analysis of data and better evaluation of provision and leadership in schools.

The Joint Committee provides clear direction for the Executive Board, which includes each authority's most senior officer for education and the Managing Director, through its adoption of the Regional Strategy and Business Plan.   The Joint Committee has agreed clear and comprehensive delegation of powers, which enables the Executive Board and the Managing Director to undertake their respective roles and responsibilities effectively.

The Executive Board and the Managing Director are supported by a range of other groups in developing the work of ERW, and in delivering its core business, for example the Strategy Implementation Board, which includes senior education officers from each authority, the Strategy Group, which includes senior leaders within ERW, and three hubs, which bring together senior staff across two authorities. However, the agendas, minutes and reports for many of these groups do not provide a clear enough record of what has been discussed, the actions agreed, progress made, or the implications of these to the work of ERW.   This means that decisions taken, important changes, progress against expected milestones, and interim outcomes are not recorded well enough, which makes it difficult to monitor and audit what is going on effectively.   Despite occasional lapses, communication between ERW's senior leaders and local authority senior leaders is usually good enough to sustain effective working relationships between all leaders.

Each local authority's education department has its own strategic planning documents.   These documents are informed by the local authority's Single Integrated Plan, and there are many links with ERW's Regional Strategy and Business Plan.   In most local authority education improvement plans, the contribution of ERW is clearly laid out. However, in a few plans this is less clear, which makes it more difficult to track how the contribution of ERW will be targeted and to evaluate the potential impact of specific pieces of work in these local authorities.

ERW takes appropriate account of local and national priorities in its strategic planning and workstreams, such as improving literacy and numeracy, improving pupil attendance, closing the gender performance gap. However, the quality of individual strategy documents varies too widely.

ERW generally supports elected members well in carrying out their scrutiny functions.   ERW's reports to scrutiny are clear and informative, and elected members are provided with useful training to help them understand education matters and the interpretation of data.   ERW has also helped the six local authority's scrutiny chairs work more closely together through the Regional Scrutiny Councillor Group.   These events are helping chairs to build an effective common approach to the scrutiny of school performance and ERW's work across the region. ERW has put in place a regional forward work plan, which includes a programme of internal audits provided through Pembrokeshire local authority. Local authority portfolio holders do not have a clear enough input to the management or oversight of the work of ERW despite their key responsibility in their local authority for the oversight of education services.

Improving quality: Adequate

On the whole, ERW has sound arrangements for evaluating the effectiveness of its school improvement services. ERW engages constructively with key stakeholders to inform their self-evaluation and planning processes. Regular consultation with headteachers through questionnaires and the headteacher representative group informs ERW's understanding of the quality of its services well and provides a useful view of potential areas for further improvement.

Leaders and managers use a good range of first-hand evidence to inform their self-evaluation judgements.   There are strong procedures for gathering evidence about the quality and impact of support that is provided to schools.   Senior leaders within ERW's management team analyse this information effectively, and use it to plan for improvements. The consortium collects and analyses data about the current performance of schools effectively, including their performance against relevant comparators and benchmarks. However, evaluations lack sufficient detail about the performance of groups of pupils, including vulnerable pupils, at a regional level.

Senior leaders use the self-evaluation evidence and data analyses to provide suitable performance and progress reports to inform the strategy implementation board, the Executive Board and the Joint Committee about performance.   There are clear procedures in place to inform individual local authority scrutiny committees of evaluations of standards and provision, and to promote dialogue regarding the quality of services provided by ERW.

The current self-evaluation report generally provides a fair and balanced view of ERW's overall performance.   The report includes a useful brief overview of the strengths and areas for improvement and an outline of the improvements currently underway.   The views of a wide range of stakeholders informed the report.

Over the last two years, the region has developed its business planning from a one-year model to a three-year medium-term rolling plan.   This plan is helping senior leaders to approach to school improvement in a more strategic and sustainable way. The current business plan for 2016-2019 sets out ERW's aims for school improvement, for improving pupil outcomes and for further addressing internal improvement priorities. The key regional priorities are grouped into three relevant strategic areas: leading learning; teaching and learning; and support for learning.

While the business plan provides clear strategic direction, much of ERW's activity is planned at a local authority level, as this is where challenge advisers and many other school improvement staff are employed.   ERW's planning process does not require senior leaders in ERW and across the six local authorities to share and scrutinise their respective plans to ensure that they take account of agreed regional priorities and ways of working as well as local priorities.

The three key regional priorities are supported by thematic workstreams, for which senior officers from local authorities provide a strategic lead through priority boards.   The workstreams are supported well by senior leaders of ERW's core team.

However, the business plan and related documentation do not set out clearly enough how the impact of ERW's work is to be evaluated and how progress against ERW's priorities will be tracked and measured. This limits ERW's capacity to capture, process, analyse, and report on the information needed to review how effectively it is improving aspects of its service.

ERW has suitable performance management arrangements for its central team of staff. They all have relevant performance management objectives. However, in a few instances these objectives are not linked clearly enough to the ERW business plan. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to monitor individuals' contributions to the overarching goals. ERW's challenge advisers are employed directly by each of the six local authorities, and therefore their performance management is facilitated at local authority level, although ERW contributes to the process appropriately.

Over the last year, ERW has refined and formalised its arrangements for identifying and managing its risks. The process is appropriate and includes relevant actions to mitigate against the risks.

ERW has taken good account of the recommendations of Estyn and the Wales Audit Office reports. It tracks the progress against each of these recommendations methodically, and presents a worthwhile analysis in their self-evaluation report. The progress is reported appropriately to the Executive Board and Joint Committee.

Partnership working: Good

ERW is an effective alliance of the six local authorities in south-west Wales. Many of the staff working for ERW, including all challenge advisers, are employed by individual local authorities rather than as part of a central ERW team. Most headteachers and local authority staff within the region understand this approach, which is distinctive compared to the other three regional consortia.

ERW has proactively engaged with a range of partners. It focuses its time and effort on partnerships that support work related to its three key priorities, leading learning; teaching and learning and support for learning.

Headteachers and local authority officers contribute well in influencing the strategic direction and priorities of ERW. The headteacher representative board is an effective forum in providing a voice for headteachers across the region and, for example, has contributed well to the ongoing development of the core visit process.

Governors generally have a good understanding of data at governor level due to the training provided by ERW. They are however less clear about the differences between the support provided by ERW and that provided by local authorities.

The constructive links that ERW has established with higher education institutions are varied and grounded in improving the learning and teaching landscape across the region. The consortium has also facilitated effective joint working between schools and local universities. As a result of the close collaboration, bespoke courses and relevant professional development opportunities are available to school staff, and ERW staff contribute to the delivery of this training. A range of

appropriate post graduate professional qualifications are available, for example, in school leadership and special educational needs.   ERW has worked well with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David to design an innovative, accredited course to start in September 2016 for suitably qualified teachers to retrain to become secondary mathematics teachers, as schools in the region have had specific difficulties in recruiting mathematics teachers.

ERW has commissioned Bangor University, in conjunction with another regional consortium, to help it understand the reasons for comparatively weak performance in rural schools within the region and consider what strategies may support improvement most effectively in these schools in future. The consortium has established strong links with diocesan authorities.   They meet regularly and the consortium ensures that the collective views of church schools are listened to.

However, the role that the diocesan authorities have in shaping regional policy is less well developed.

ERW's has assigned a lead officer for work to reduce the impact of poverty on attainment and appointed a regional co-ordinator for the Pupil Deprivation Grant and looked-after children.   The co-ordinator has a sound understanding of the needs of children who are looked after and has strong links with looked-after childrens' co-ordinators throughout the region.   ERW's work with partners in implementing the anti-poverty strategy is at a very early stage of development.

ERW supports partnership work across the region to improve the provision for 14 to 19-year-olds. However, ERW's role is generally limited to ensuring that specific grants are used effectively, such as funding for the Welsh Baccalaureate.

Members of scrutiny committees engage well with each other and share ERW's vision. These members benefit from useful presentations from ERW staff and appreciate the transparency in sharing information on school performance from across the region.

ERW benefits from professional support from local authorities on a range of functions including human resources and governance.   Local authority officers are very clear on the lead roles they have and in advising the Executive Board and Joint Committee.

There are effective links with the other regional consortia and these have been used to good effect to influence national policy and decision-making. ERW has also taken a strategic lead on developing a communications plan to raise the profile of teaching as a career option.

Resource management: Good

ERW has a strong ethos of working collaboratively across the six local authorities. The local authorities have a commitment to fund the equivalent of 58 full-time equivalent challenge advisers as an irreducible regional resource, employed locally by the six local authorities.   This number remains unchanged from ERW's original legal agreement, despite ERW currently delivering its core visit programme

successfully in most schools with notably fewer challenge advisers. School improvement funding is largely retained within the six local authorities and resources are allocated within the region according to need, which is based primarily on the categorisation process.   The region has also agreed responses to specific support needs within a few local authorities over the last three years and has moved resources to provide this support.

As outlined in ERW's legal agreement, each of the six local authorities provides an in-kind shared service for the region, for example procurement or monitoring officer. However, as the cost of these services to each local authority varies, the burden is shared unequally across the six authorities.   A further accepted part of the regional approach is that local authority officers contribute to regional working by providing a wide range of activities on an in-kind basis. However, the region does not seek to quantify the full financial value of this support.

The region's strong emphasis on working collaboratively has led to the effective provision of guidance documents, templates and policy support, which are reducing duplication and increasing consistency of approach across the authorities.

Communication and consultation about financial planning and arrangements for the central ERW team are well developed, with the central budget and retained grant funding monitored closely every week. There are effective links between ERW's financial officers and the local authority finance teams, which enable processes to be managed effectively.

Within ERW's business plan there is limited information on the level of resources for the business plan areas relating to the central team, although the plan does identify whether core funding or grant funding is to be used.   ERW strategically considers the range of financial risks that it faces and ensures that relevant actions are taken to mitigate against those appropriately.

The regular financial reports presented to the Joint Committee about both the central team and grant allocations are clear and enable members of the Joint Committee to make informed decisions.   The Joint Committee has recently considered the medium term funding requirements of the central team to ensure that it can continue to deliver its service to the region.

Annually, the Joint Committee agrees a formula for the delegation of the Education Improvement Grant to schools and has agreed to use high delegation levels to meet its strategic aims.   There is a clear principle in place that funding is used to deliver school improvement and increase the capacity of schools whilst retaining a lean central team.

ERW challenge advisers and officers challenge schools appropriately over their plans for the use of grant funding and the management of resources is considered in meetings with schools.   ERW has been successful in obtaining additional grant funding to support its strategic aims.

ERW's internal audit process has strengthened its assurance on a range of areas including grant funding and wider governance arrangements whilst recognising a

small number of areas for further improvement. In relation to Pupil Deprivation Grant funding internal audit has confirmed that the 2015-2016 funding was being used appropriately in the region with suitable plans in place outlining how the grant would be used and tracking systems in place to monitor outcomes of eligible pupils against the grant entitlement.   In addition, quarterly audit monitoring of Pupil Deprivation Grant arrangements has been established, which allows the six local authorities to provide effective assurance to ERW's section 151 officer.

Whilst lacking a written workforce strategy, ERW has a good understanding of the future workforce needs across the region and this has informed the recent development of a number of partnerships to address these issues, although it is too soon to assess the impact. ERW uses secondments well to provide development opportunities for school leaders and build capacity for self-improvement, although it is too early to formally evaluate the impact on pupil outcomes.

ERW has further developed its framework to consider value for money, which includes a series of seven principles that seek to inform an overall judgement.   It considers the impact of its services on pupil outcomes, noting the overall performance of headline indicators at key stage 4, including the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals. However, this approach is not fully developed and it does not consider the totality of resources used to influence outcomes, including the in-kind contributions from each local authority.

ERW plans to conduct a formal value for money review later in 2016 for consideration by the Joint Committee, although a number of elements of the central team have been already reviewed against the framework including the central administrative team and translation service. That review identified the need to reorganise to better reflect the changing demands on the team and this has increased its capacity at no additional cost to local authorities.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

Iwan Roberts	Reporting Inspector
Mark Campion	Team Inspector
Tony Bate	Team Inspector
Huw Davies	Team Inspector
Gerard Kerslake	Team Inspector
Huw Watkins	Team Inspector
Robert Davies	Team Inspector
Hywel Jones	Team Inspector
Karen Newby Jones	Team Inspector
Rhona Edwards	Team Inspector
Sian Clark	WAO
Gareth Jones	WAO
Helen Morgan Rees	Nominee

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available on the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Glossary of terms

National Curriculum

Expected National Curriculum levels

- By the end of the Foundation Phase, at the age of seven, pupils are expected to reach Foundation Phase outcome 5 and the more able outcome 6.
- By the end of the key stage 2, at the age of eleven, learners are expected to reach level 4 and the more able to reach level 5.
- By the end of the key stage 3, at the age of fourteen, learners are expected to reach level 5 and the more able to reach level 6 or level 7.

Foundation Phase indicator (FPI)

Progress in learning through the Foundation Phase is indicated by outcomes (from outcome 1 to outcome 6). The Foundation Phase indicator (FPI) relates to the expected performance in three areas of learning in the Foundation Phase: literacy, language and communication in English or Welsh first language; mathematical development; personal and social development, wellbeing and cultural diversity Pupils must achieve the expected outcome (outcome 5) in the three areas above to gain the Foundation Phase indicator.

Core subject indicator in key stages 2, 3 and 4

The core subject indicator relates to the expected performance in English or Welsh first language, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum. Learners must gain at least the expected level in either English or Welsh first language together with mathematics and science to gain the core subject indicator.

External examinations at key stage 4 or post-16

Core subject indicator – as above.

Level 1 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade D to G.

The Level 1 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grades D to G.

Level 2 qualification – the equivalent of a GCSE at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A* to C.

The Level 2 threshold including English or Welsh first language and mathematics – learners must have gained level 2 qualifications in English or Welsh first language and in mathematics as part of their threshold.

Level 3 qualification – the equivalent of an A level at A* to C.

The Level 3 threshold – learners must have gained a volume of qualifications equivalent to two A levels at grade A* to E.

The **average wider points score** includes all external qualifications approved for use in Wales at the relevant age – for example at age 16 or 18. To calculate this, the total points gained by all learners in the cohort is divided by the number of learners.

The **capped average points score** only includes the best eight results for each pupil from all qualifications approved for use in Wales at age 16.

All-Wales Core Data sets

Schools and local authorities may refer to performance relative to their family of schools. These families of schools have been created to enable schools to compare their performance to similar schools across Wales. Families include schools with similar proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals, living in 20% most deprived areas of Wales, having special education needs at school action plus or statemented and with English as an additional language acquisition less than competent.