



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

Report following the monitoring of

**ERW consortium
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by

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

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Outcome of monitoring

In June 2016, Estyn inspected the school improvement services provided by ERW. In November 2017, Estyn visited ERW to review the progress made by the consortium in relation to the recommendations identified in the inspection.

In evaluating progress for each recommendation we considered the following:

- Has the consortium understood the reasons behind the recommendation?
- Has the consortium taken reasonable action to address the recommendation successfully, taking into account its starting point, the time between inspection and follow-up visit and the complexity of the issues?
- Has the consortium been appropriately supported in addressing the recommendations by its partner local authorities?
- Has the consortium ensured that changes arising from its progress in addressing each recommendation are embedded within its working practices to secure sustained improvement?

In coming to a view about the progress against the recommendations, the monitoring team took into account the trends in performance over the last five years as a context for the evaluation of the impact of its work in schools. However, it is important to note that outcomes cannot be attributed to solely to the work of the regional consortium as other partners in the system also play an important role.

The monitoring team considered a range of evidence including the consortium's business planning, evaluations, challenge advisers' reports, target setting procedures, risk assessments and the views of headteachers.

Estyn does not plan to make any further follow-up visits to the ERW. Any remaining areas for improvement will be monitored informally by Estyn's regional link inspector and the relevant local authority link inspectors and considered during future inspections of local government education services.

Progress since the last inspection

Since the inspection of June 2016, overall progress in meeting the four recommendations has been relatively slow. ERW's central team and six local authorities have found it difficult to increase the pace of improvement under the existing governance arrangements.

In September 2017, the joint committee instructed the lead chief executive, Section 151 officer and managing director to establish a programme team with suitable governance structures and with access to the appropriate financial and human resources information to:

- Clarify, agree and document the respective roles and accountabilities of the local authorities and region in relation to all school improvement functions and services

- Manage the project to clarify, scope and shape the accountability arrangements for the employment and deployment of school improvement staff including challenge advisers. This will allow the consortium to deliver a single effective school improvement service and to comply fully with Welsh Government requirements
- Review financial arrangements to enable the consortium to deliver a single effective school improvement service and to comply fully with Welsh Government requirements
- Develop and cost an organisational delivery model to meet identified priorities, supported by a comprehensive and costed implementation plan with timescales
- Identify the ERW central team with sufficient strategic and operating capacity
- Establish clear plans to secure and maintain effective communication with and engagement of the six directors of education and headteachers throughout the process and secure consistent implementation of the business plan
- Bring together the work of evolving the region with all grants by April 2018 and other resources, including staff from September 2018
- Review hub arrangements.

The programme team is to report to the joint committee with a set of initial proposals in December 2017, for consideration by the six local authorities, before the joint committee makes a final decision.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that school improvement services address the performance of schools causing concern, particularly in the secondary sector.

Limited progress in addressing the recommendation

The inspection report of June 2016, noted that ‘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 improvement service’. In the 18 months since the report, the central team of ERW has introduced a range of appropriate measures to improve the quality of challenge and support for schools causing concern. However, the lines of accountability for addressing issues in these schools remain blurred between the central team and the six local authorities.

Prior to the June 2016 inspection, a few secondary schools in two of the region’s authorities were a significant cause for concern. At the date of this review, 18 months later, all but two of this group of schools remain in statutory categories. This means that they are failing to provide an acceptable standard of education for their pupils over a considerable period. There is no clear agreement between the central team, leaders in the six local authorities and the schools themselves on an appropriate range of actions to bring about improvement.

ERW is more effective in supporting improvement in primary schools and only a few remain in a statutory category for an extended period.

The central team has ensured a comprehensive programme of training to support and develop the work of both primary and secondary challenge advisors across the region. All challenge advisers access good quality training and guidance particularly for supporting and challenging schools causing concern, prior to school core visits

taking place. This is helping to improve the consistency and accuracy of school categorisation. Further bespoke training, identified through challenge adviser self-evaluation is helping to improve specific aspects of their work such as promoting more evaluative report writing and knowing how to hold difficult conversations with schools causing concern. There are appropriate arrangements to quality assure core visit reports. ERW responds well to the concerns of challenge advisers and has improved systems to share intelligence about for example good practice for school-to-school support. These measures are having a positive impact on the quality of the work of most challenge advisers. However, where the central team continues to have concerns about the quality of some challenge advisers' work, consortium leaders are unable to address this directly as the performance management of nearly all challenge advisers remains with the six local authorities.

Since April 2017, three challenge advisers, under the direct control of the central ERW team, have supported secondary schools in Pembrokeshire. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this initiative in bringing about secondary school improvement, particularly in the three schools where concerns are greatest.

The central team has introduced an improved system to capture a wide range of intelligence about all schools within the region more comprehensively. This allows improved monitoring of the progress of most schools by senior leaders. However, where schools receive additional support because of concerns, there is often insufficient identification of success criteria against which to measure the impact of the support provided.

Leaders of learning work closely with secondary school challenge advisers to provide additional support for example, for English, Welsh and mathematics departments in schools where there are performance issues. However, outcomes following this support are very variable.

Recent meetings of the ERW executive board have included agenda items to review the progress of schools causing concern. However, the quality of information presented to the board and subsequent discussion within the board at recent meetings has not considered well enough the reasons why a few secondary schools fail to make the expected progress. This means that members of the executive board fail to provide the joint committee with appropriate intelligence to allow members to challenge effectively senior leaders across ERW about this lack of progress.

Recommendation 2: 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.

Satisfactory progress in addressing the recommendation

Since the core inspection, ERW has improved the structure of its annual business plan to ensure that there is a clear relationship between its priorities and the plans of each local authority within the region. This provides clear lines of accountability for actions and informs the day-to-day work of the central staff successfully. However, the plans often do not contain appropriate milestones for delivery or targets for

improvement that are specific or detailed enough in terms of expected or measurable outcomes. This makes it difficult for leaders to evaluate the impact of actions on pupil outcomes or progress.

Leaders have provided comprehensive training to all school improvement staff that enables them to have a clearer understanding of the priorities in the business plan and their role in delivering specific aspects of it locally.

The central team has developed a useful electronic monitoring system to record the status of the activities in its business plan. This enables leaders to monitor the progress of these effectively, identify any potential risks at an early stage and support staff to rectify any shortcomings appropriately. However, the deficiencies in the quality of information in the system do not help leaders to evaluate the impact of all activities consistently on improving outcomes for pupils.

Recommendation 3: 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, fully costed and enable leaders to monitor progress.

Satisfactory progress in addressing the recommendation

Since the core inspection, ERW has introduced a consistent approach to recording clearly and carefully the work of the main boards. This includes common approaches to setting agendas, taking minutes and monitoring actions between meetings. The central team has also provided helpful guidance to chairs and members of groups on their roles and responsibilities and on how they expect the groups to operate.

ERW has developed a useful electronic system to capture the work of the five boards that oversee the main priorities in the business plan, as well as the work of the wide range of working groups that support these boards. This system enables leaders within the central team to monitor progress of actions, track work that is behind schedule and respond to identified risks. As a result, these leaders are more effective at raising important concerns about progress with the executive board and joint committee.

However, over the last 18 months, the executive board and joint committee have too often accepted reports without robust challenge. This means that there are limited actions or decisions arising from reports presented and no record of any concerns expressed. This is despite slow progress in key areas of work in the region such as the progress of secondary schools causing concern.

Recently, the joint committee received reports, raising significant concerns about ERW's financial arrangements and the work of challenge advisers. It has committed to a comprehensive review of ERW's structure and operation as a result.

Local authority officers chair many working groups but ERW's central team is often not involved in the meetings of these groups. The usefulness of the information uploaded to ERW's electronic system from these groups is too variable and the quality assurance of their work is limited. Consequently, leaders within the central

team lack confidence as to whether actions are effective and whether they are aware of concerns that require attention.

The frequent absence of specific, measurable outcomes and precise costings attached to actions in the plans of the priority boards and working groups restricts how well leaders can monitor progress and evaluate impact.

Recommendation 4: 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 outcome.

Satisfactory progress in addressing the recommendation

ERW has established a series of service level agreements, for example finance, communications and human resources that quantify the financial value of the support services that the six local authorities provide. These service level agreements allow ERW to understand better the costs that its partner local authorities incur in supporting its work.

The revised business-planning framework identifies clearly the core or grant funding used to deliver the business plan. Senior leaders hold business plan owners to account regularly. This increases their understanding of the need to use the resources at their disposal effectively. However, ERW recognises that it can further refine how they identify the resources in its business plan.

The increased financial capacity in the central team allows closer monitoring of the use of resources. Leaders are now in a better position to provide assurance on the appropriate use of funding across the consortium's activities. ERW has recently changed its financial reporting to respond to the external audit recommendation to provide greater oversight of grant funding to the joint committee. The new format provides members with a more detailed understanding of how ERW uses grant funding to address its priorities.

ERW has clear processes for identifying and addressing financial risks and takes appropriate action to mitigate these. ERW works effectively with the other regional consortia and Welsh Government to secure earlier notification of grants. This enables ERW to plan its use of resources more effectively.

There is a clear process for holding schools to account for the use of non-directly delegated grant funding. However, schools' evaluations of this funding do not focus sufficiently on the impact of the activities undertaken on pupil outcomes. In response to an internal audit recommendation, ERW has provided challenge advisers with clear guidance and training to support their evaluation of schools' use of delegated grant funding, including the pupil development and education improvement grants. Challenge advisers now evaluate how schools plan to use these grants more effectively. Despite this, inconsistencies remain in how a few of schools plan their grant spending and evaluate the impact on pupil outcomes. ERW uses its value for money framework to evaluate the use of grants it receives and this informs its self-evaluation process. However, the quality of the evaluation of the use of these grants is inconsistent and does not always identify clearly the impact achieved.

ERW builds its value for money principles into its business planning processes and this is increasing its understanding of how all areas of activity contribute to the achievement of best value. It uses the value for money framework to evaluate the activities of its central team, for example to assess whether digital administrative processes secure improvements in efficiency and effectiveness. However, value for money reports to the joint committee cover the work of the central team and not the overall impact of all activity across the region.

Senior leaders understand that the current organisational design constrains ERW's ability to deliver value for money. This means that joint committee members have limited insight of the extent to which the consortium delivers value for money overall.

Recommendations

ERW needs to continue to address the inspection recommendations identified by the inspection team.