

Lynne Neagle AM,
Chair – Children, Young People and Education
Committee,

26 July 2017

Regional Education Consortia

Dear Lynne,

The Public Accounts Committee undertook a short inquiry into the findings of the Auditor General's memorandum on [Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – a review of progress](#), published on 3 November 2016. The Committee took evidence from the four regional consortia, Estyn and the Welsh Government.

This work was in part to inform the Committee's response to the Welsh Government's White Paper on 'Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed', I have annexed an extract from that response which summarises the Committee's views on the consortia as a model for regionalisation.

In addition to this the Committee were keen to explore the issues raised in the Auditor General's report and the wider issues arising from the Estyn inspection reports.

The Committee raised a number of issues with the Deputy Permanent Secretary for Education and Public Services arising from the evidence session, which your Committee may wish to pick up as part of any work you do on the Regional Consortia.



The Role of the Consortia within the Leadership Academy

The Committee was particularly interested in the intended role of the consortia within the leadership academy. In response to our letter, the Deputy Permanent Secretary told the Committee that ‘it is too early in the scoping of the Academy to fully describe the future role that the Consortia may play within the organisation’. We believe that it is important that the Consortia are either included within this academy, with proper accreditation or an equivalent in-house model is developed to ensure that the Consortia have the necessary depth in leadership to be a success.

Challenge Advisors

The Committee raised concerns about there being a limited cohort of qualified and experienced challenge advisors within the consortia, and are concerned about the capacity of the Consortia to deliver on a strategic level. The Deputy Permanent Secretary said in his response to the Committee that the consortia’s ‘collective progress towards ensuring the quality and quantity of challenge advisors will remain a focus of review by Welsh Government, through the delivery of their business plans and during Challenge and Review meetings’. We believe that this may warrant further scrutiny as it essential the consortia can deliver on a strategic level.

Consortia Outcomes

The Committee found it was difficult to attribute outcomes to the Consortia, which made it difficult to illustrate their role and successes. The Deputy Permanent Secretary suggested that time is needed for the efforts of the consortia to strengthen the evaluation of their impact. It is important to be able evaluate the outcomes to ensure they are delivering and to be able to easily identify the outcomes of the consortia to make clear their role, purpose and value to the teaching profession and public.



I have attached the relevant correspondence between the Committee and the Deputy Permanent Secretary to this letter. I hope this is useful for your Committee, and I would be interested in receiving an update on any work undertaken by your Committee in this area.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nick Ramsay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending from the end of the word "Ramsay".

Nick Ramsay AM
Chair



Regional Education Consortia – a model for regionalisation

1. Following the publication of the Auditor General’s memorandum which provided an update on progress in response to recommendations set out in his June 2015 report [Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia](#). The Committee agreed to look at the issues emerging from this, and to consider whether there were any lessons which could be learnt around regionalisation.
2. The Committee took evidence from all four consortia and Estyn at its meeting on 27 March. In addition to this, we undertook a survey with teaching professionals and received written correspondence from NASUWT Cymru. The Committee have a number of observations emerging from these sessions which we believe should be considered by the Cabinet Secretary when planning for regionalisation.

A Clear Mandate

3. The Committee were concerned that there has been a lack of clarity at the outset as to the role of the Consortia. While we recognise that there has been good progress in developing the role of the consortia since the last memorandum from the Auditor General, we were concerned by the evidence provided that the national direction for the consortia was not clear at the outset.
4. All the witnesses reflected that one of the key lessons to be learnt was that more time was needed at the start to set out aims and a direction for the regional bodies being established, as this had taken a substantial amount of time to address and had impacted on the ability to deliver.
5. When discussing what she thought could have been done differently, Hannah Woodhouse, Managing Director, Central South Consortium Joint Education Service told us:

... getting the national model really clear at the beginning, before September 2012, in terms of responsibilities, budget, governance, success measures, capacity expectations.
6. Simon Brown, strategic director for Estyn agreed that the national model had been helpful in improving and that:

... one of the issues with the national model when it first emerged in 2012 was it was a model that was developing quite quickly and some of that clarity wasn’t there in the original model



7. The Committee agrees that there needs to be a clear national direction, but believes there should be flexibility within the system, rather than an overly prescriptive approach, on how to deliver the national picture. Each region has different challenges to address e.g. rurality, Welsh language provision and for regional working to be a success, but we believe flexibility under a national strategy is critical.
8. The Committee was concerned that during the initial period of establishing the consortia, there was a sense of competition between the bodies. While we welcome that they now work together with a sense of co-operation, we still are concerned about how the consortia are working together and sharing knowledge. For example, there appeared to be little cross consortia knowledge about the research projects ongoing within each consortia.
9. In moving forward with any regionalisation of further services, we believe that the lesson should be learnt from the experiences of the consortia and a clear guidance and frameworks should be established by the Welsh Government for those charged with delivering regionally to work towards at the outset.

The Regional Footprint

10. The Committee explored with witnesses about the risks and benefits of a change to the regional footprint for the consortia in any future changes to the regional structures in Wales.
11. The witnesses highlighted that there were a number of risks to changing the existing structures as this may erode the positive progress made by the consortia to educational improvements. Furthermore, there were concerns that changes may be made to the structure of regional educational consortia to address some of the issues in the local government structure, as the focus for any changes to the consortia should be based around educational improvement.
12. We heard evidence that there are significant concerns about the number of good school leaders and the potential risk of staff 'churn' due to an unstable environment, which is potentially destabilising. The Committee believes that it is important to set a clear path for the regional structure over the medium to long term to provide the necessary security, for those involved.
13. There was some agreement among the witnesses that there was a clear benefit to coterminosity with existing services in any regional model moving forward. The Committee received no clear evidence as to whether it



would be better to follow the local health board structure or the economic development regions- although Estyn did suggest there is some benefit to the utilising the economic boundaries, because:

...if you think of pre-16 education going through into post-16, and an alignment, so that you've got schools and post-16 providers mapping the skillset in a region to the economic skills of a particular region, using labour market information ultimately, the economic footprint on an economic model tends to make sense, because you're then developing learners who've got the necessary skills for the economic market within their region, assuming there's not a lot of cross-Wales movement of labour at the moment.

14. Given that the consortia have been established and appear to be improving and maturing, we believe there is value in maintaining this structure (while recognising there may be some small adjustments).

Governance and Accountability within a Regional Structure

15. The Committee raised a number of concerns about the relationship between local educational authorities and regional educational consortia, and whether there is enough clarity between their roles to allow for sufficient accountability to the electorate.
16. Leadership is key in order for regional working to be a success. It is essential that elected members are engaged with the process and understand their role in the scrutiny process.
17. The responses from the witnesses highlighted that this was a live issue which is still under consideration and development. As a Committee we would urge that thorough consideration is given to the governance arrangements to ensure that responsibilities are clear and that the responsibility of the local representatives to the electorate remains clearly traceable.
18. Estyn have not made any inspection judgements on the impact of the consortia, and during the evidence session, outlined a number of difficulties with separating the achievements of individual schools versus the impact of the consortia. They indicated that it would not be looking to do so in the near future.



19. We believe that consideration needs to be given to how to judge the success/impact of regional working where this still sits alongside local responsibilities. In the case of education, individual schools have a significant influence and are ultimately responsible for decisions, which makes identifying the impact of the regional consortia, at best, complicated.
20. In addition, the survey undertaken by the Committee highlighted that many within the teaching profession have little knowledge/appreciation of what the consortia deliver. While recognising the argument put forward by our witnesses that school improvement and positive results are what matters, we believe that in order for regional working to be a success it needs to be recognised as having a positive impact

