School improvement consortia: an early assessment of their readiness to deliver

Position as at November 2012

iSOS PARTNERSHIP

Policy background

In February 2011 the Minister for Education and Skills in Wales set out his 20 priorities for rapidly transforming standards of achievement in Wales, in response to declining relative performance in the PISA international assessments. One of the challenges he outlined was the structural management and leadership of education in Wales. He said:

"I have said repeatedly I would not have invented 22 local education authorities. I now believe that the fragmentation of education authorities in the mid-1990s was one of the contributing factors for the downturn in educational performance a decade later, as effective challenge and support was lost in many parts of the system and time, energy and resource was dissipated. As Estyn has reported, strategic management is good or better in only a half of local authorities."

To address this challenge the Minister included the following direction to local authorities as one of his 20 priorities:
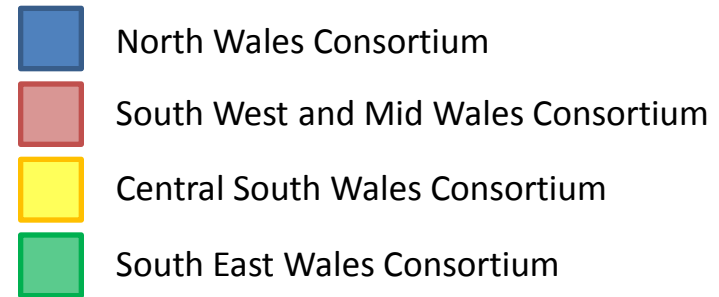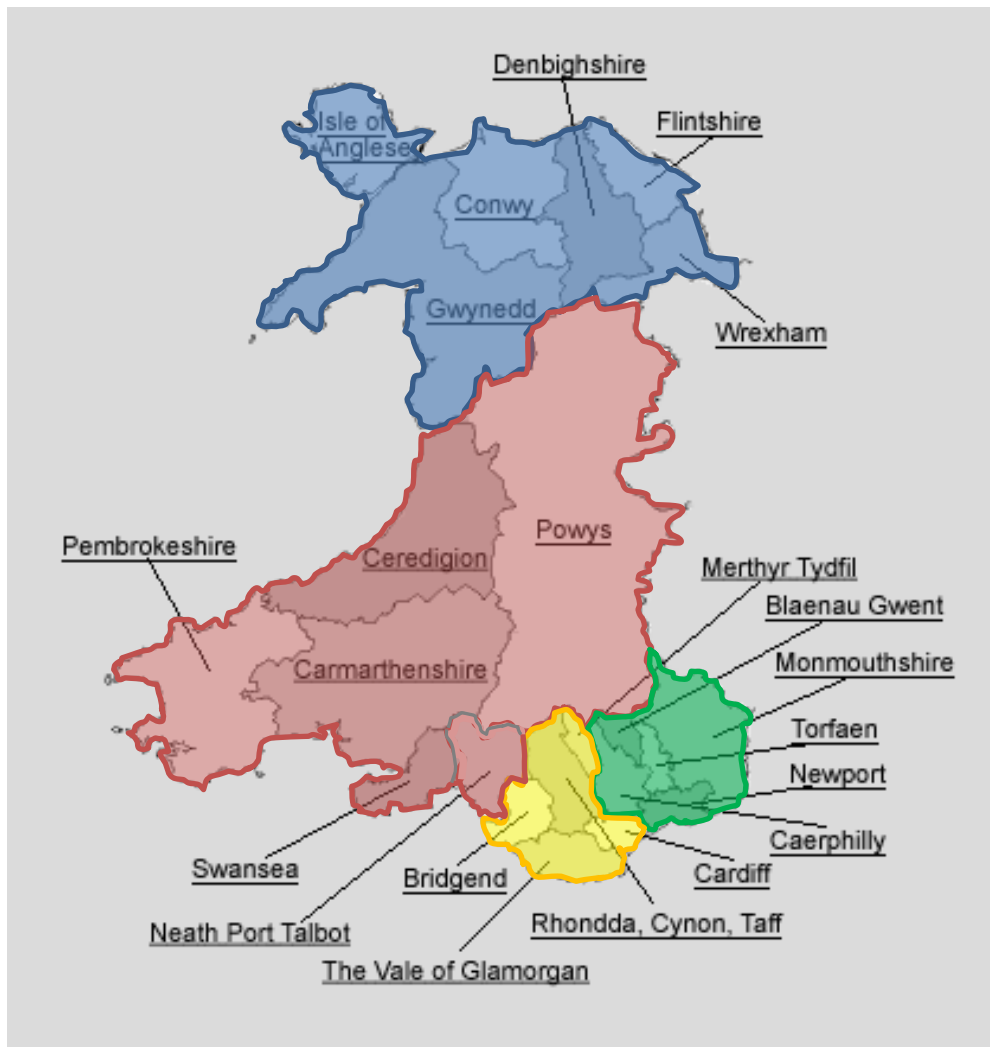
"We will expect local authorities to participate in consortia arrangements, including shared consortium services, or suffer financial penalties, including the withdrawal of Better Schools Funding. The Consortia will identify system leaders, who will support and challenge the Professional Learning Communities, which will have a focus on literacy and numeracy."

The potential benefits of moving to consortium working are:

•Better value for money through economies of scale and efficiencies, enabling greater devolution of funding to schools.

•More opportunities to share good practice between local authorities and break down silo-working

•Enabling the best leaders of education to influence and support schools across a wider geographical area

•Facilitating schools to support the improvement of other schools

How the consortia are configured

North Wales Consortium

South West and Mid Wales Consortium

Central South Wales Consortium

South East Wales Consortium

- Local authorities in Wales have organised themselves into four contiguous groups.

- Some sub-groups within the consortia have a history of working together. For example, Bridgend, RCT and Merthyr Tydfil have previously jointly delivered school improvement through a shared service called ESIS. Similarly Anglesey and Gwynedd commission Cynnal to provide support for school improvement.

- The consortia are very different in terms of geographical reach. Central South and South East are relatively compact whereas the other two are much more dispersed.

- This will affect the degree to which it is feasible to deliver services through a single physical location.

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Context to this review

The **purpose** of the review was threefold:

- An early view of the progress made towards implementing consortia arrangements
- The opportunity to reflect on progress, share lessons learned between consortia and identify priorities for action
- An objective evidence base across the consortia to inform the development of future policy

The **process** involved the following steps for each consortium between 8 and 19 November 2012:

- Desk based analysis of core documents supplied by each consortium
- Fieldwork interviews and focus groups involving representatives from schools, local authorities and the consortium itself
- Workshop with the consortium leadership team to facilitate a self-review against the readiness to deliver framework
- A conversation to provide feedback and agree the judgements against the framework following calibration across the four regions

The **framework** for judging readiness to deliver:

- Focused on three main aspects of delivery – leadership, capacity and systems
- Each of the three aspects was further broken down into four parts
- There were twelve main judgements made for each consortium

The **judgements** were made on where consortia expected to be at this point of delivery against their agreed business plans, therefore:

- 'Green' represents that on balance delivery is on track/ahead but still with some issues to be resolved
- 'Red' represents that on balance delivery is off track against where it was expected to be, there are some significant issues and a lack of clarity or confidence about how the issues will be addressed
- 'Amber Green or Amber Red' represents that on balance delivery is on or off track but the evidence is more mixed than a straight green or red judgement
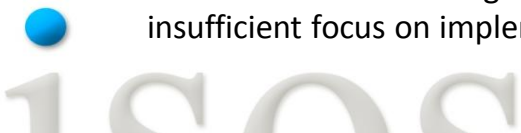
Overall Reflections

- Each consortium engaged positively in the review, was typically open and honest, and in the main, self-reviews were accurate and accorded with our views and the evidence collected

- Each consortium found the process useful for reflecting on progress, welcoming objective challenge and identifying priorities for action

- One would not expect consortia to be 'green' across the board at this stage of delivery simply because it is early days in the transition and there is still some uncertainty or unknowns around aspects of delivery

- 'Red' judgements highlight aspects of delivery that are relatively weak, where there is uncertainty or it is just simply too early to tell

- It is a fast moving picture. The judgements were a snapshot as at November and could change quickly in some cases, certainly within six months and in some cases quicker than this

- Making comparable judgments between and within regions has been made complicated by the following factors:
  - The planned scale and pace of change varies by region as set out in consortium business cases which were signed off by the Welsh Government
  - The multiple parts to regional working are typically progressing at different rates and with different levels of success, making it difficult to weigh-up and achieve an aggregate view
  - Progress that has been made historically is not the same as judging current 'readiness' to deliver for the future

- We felt that sometimes more objectivity was needed in the judgements about progress being made. There was a little bit of unhealthy competition in some of the consortium in terms of wanting to be seen to be the best in Wales. Too often in the past progress has been judged on anecdote and who shouts the loudest. This report should be used by each consortium to reflect on their own strengths and to look at what they can learn from others, so that the consortia arrangements are strengthened and built upon across Wales and not just in any one region. There is a critical role for Welsh Government to play here too.

Summary of progress

- Overall, there is a strong commitment to making the new regional arrangements work and those involved in each consortium have been working hard to ensure effective delivery

- Even though it is early days, there are encouraging signs of progress and indications of the potential benefits of the new arrangements. Indeed, each consortium has at least one leading strength that the others could learn from:

    - Central South had the best function in place for the commissioning of support via its 'Links' arrangements

    - South East had the best function in place for the 'system leader' autumn term visits

    - South West and Mid Wales had the most effective performance management system for schools

    - North Wales was implementing the most ambitious integrated regional school management information system

- In terms of progress against the twelve judgements it is a mixed picture within each consortium which is what you would expect at this early stage of delivery (the judgements for each region are shown overleaf)

- When comparing overall progress between the four consortium, it is our view that just one consortium (South East) is ahead of the others and that the others are broadly in similar positions, albeit all with differing challenges still to be addressed

- We identified a set of cross-cutting challenges which consortia need to address going forward:

    - There needs to be a greater focus on articulating (and delivering) what it is about the new regional arrangements that will improve schools, especially teaching and learning, and in turn raise standards

    - Whilst there has been some success in attracting new talent into Wales the bulk of the capacity in the short-term will come from within and regions need to grow and develop talent (while continuing to attract from outside)

    - The role of schools in providing systematic school-to-school support is underdeveloped and not being given sufficient focus within the regional delivery models

    - The main thrust of change is based on improving the quality of capacity and learning from best practice – there is insufficient focus on implementing proven interventions such as recognised coaching programmes for improving teachers

	Readiness		Score	Evidence and rationale
Central South	Leadership to deliver	Clarity of vision	[red/amber]	• The vision for the new organisation is clear and ambitious in the scale of change and pace – LiNKS is clearer and more developed than the JES • The ambition for improving schools and standards is less developed, as is communication of the vision to schools and building buy-in • Working with schools to build the regional strategy and ambition for how the new organisation will improve schools and standards is a priority
		Integrity of design	[amber/green]	• The design has been based on learning lessons from the previous model, external input and evidence of effective commissioning models • Design of the brokerage function, relationship between the JES and LiNKS, and the precise role of the LA is less developed within the design • Translating the design into practice, fully testing it during implementation and demonstrating it is different to the previous ESIS model is the priority
		Strength of leadership	[amber/green]	• Transition to the new organisation has been well led and there is strong collective commitment to making the new organisation work • Delays to the appointment of the JES interim leadership have delayed developments to regional school improvement and engagement of schools • Relentless communication of the vision, engaging schools and partners and building wide-spread support to the new organisation are the priorities
		Rigour of governance	[red/amber]	• A framework and structures are in place that look sound but are yet to be tested in practice and it is too early to judge effectiveness • The consortium is yet to focus on performance, accountability or impact on school standards. Link with local authority governance needs clarifying • Focussing on the impact of the new organisation, school performance and ensuring coherence with local authority governance is now the priority
	Capacity to deliver	Level of resourcing	[red/amber]	• The levels of resource available to fund posts are sufficient and planning is on-track to achieve the targeted efficiency savings • Key leadership posts remain unfilled and there are unfilled system leader posts which is placing pressure on the rest of the organisation • Recruiting and filling vacant posts but without lowering the bar that has been set for quality is now the priority
		Clarity of roles and responsibilities	[amber/green]	• Roles and responsibilities are largely clear and follow the design of the new organisation • The role of local authorities, their relationships with the new organisation and schools' role in leading school-to-school support needs clarifying • Articulating how the whole 'system' works and the links between the key partners as part of the vision is now the priority
		Credibility of staff	[amber/green]	• Overall, the credibility has improved and the consortium has had some success with external recruitment and seconded school leaders • There is still some variation in quality and this might impact on the overall brand • Maintaining the bar on quality for recruitment, a robust plan for attracting more 'externals' and school based practitioners are the priorities
		Capacity of partners	[amber/green]	• There is insufficient identification of excellent practice in schools but the consortium have a plan to build and use it. LiNKS has started to commission school-to-school support • The 'system leadership' approach is not quite mature enough yet and needs investment – links with partners, especially HoVEP also need clarifying • Building the capacity of schools to support each other and maximising the potential of HoVEP is the priority
	Systems to deliver	Quality of planning	[red/amber]	• Good planning has enabled delivery to tight timescales and there is strong alignment between LiNKS and the national 'improving schools' plan • The next phase of planning is less developed and communication about the plan is necessary to ensure shared understanding of key milestones • A focus on planning the school improvement strategy and the operational detail of the core systems/processes are the priorities
		Coherent core processes	[red/amber]	• The consortium have put core JES processes in place but have been rushed. New target setting and PM systems stand out as having most potential • There has been limited time to test approaches and concerns they are too bureaucratic. Mechanisms for making them systematic are still developing • Testing that the processes are fit for purpose, learning lessons from the early implementation and refining them in light of this are the priorities
		Monitoring and evaluation	[red/amber]	• LiNKS has been active at building in quality assurance and feedback into their approach but it is less developed in other parts of the service • A number of the approaches are still under development and there is a lack of clarity about the key performance indicators to drive governance • Implementing approaches that will provide a 'temperature check' on the effectiveness of implementation and school feedback is the priority
		Use of data	[amber/green]	• There is a clear emphasis on data at pupil level and groups of pupils, and a strong and creative data team to tackle data sharing obstacles • Schools are still adjusting to new approaches and relationships were difficult in October during the early implementation • Continuing to work through the solutions to data sharing and streamlining data systems with local authorities are the priorities

	Readiness		Score	Evidence and rationale
South East	Leadership to deliver	Clarity of vision	🟨	• There has been high ambition, good communication and strong engagement with school leaders and young people in the development of the EAS • The ongoing challenge is about achieving a consistent message across the five local authorities and embedding the vision • The priority is about translating the ambition into quantifiable targets and objectives that the whole system is signed up to
		Integrity of design	🟨	• The functional design is right, the company model in principle is strong and effective practice from within the region is being scaled up • The brokerage function and the role of school-to-school support is theoretical at the moment and needs to be clarified in operational terms • Applying the same focus and level of rigour in developing the 'system leader' side of the EAS to the curriculum side is the priority going forward
		Strength of leadership	🟨	• The new managing director of EAS has done a great job, collective leadership has been strong and support for local authorities in need is positive • The ongoing challenge is about ensuring consistency across the five local authorities and ensuring united and consistent leadership • The priority is to ensure that communication of the vision is consistent across all five local authorities at all levels of leadership
		Rigour of governance	🟨	• Protocols are in place, regular routines are established at all levels and the consortium is using the categorisation of schools to review progress • Local authority quality assurance is necessary now as trust builds in the service but there could be a risk of this becoming a duplication of resource • As protocols are embedded it will be important to keep under review the amount of local quality assurance that is necessary to minimise duplication
	Capacity to deliver	Level of resourcing	🟥	• The consortium is anticipating some savings, optimistic about value for money and have managed to fill most unfilled system leader posts recently • There is some uncertainty around overall budget planning and less rigour has been applied to recruiting curriculum staff with capacity gaps remaining • As a matter of urgency the consortium need to accurately cost and produce the budget plan for the EAS
		Clarity of roles and responsibilities	🟨	• Roles and responsibilities are well documented, communicated and beginning to be understood in theory • Some aspects such as brokerage, the relationship between the two halves of the EAS and the residual role of local authorities are unclear in practice • Clarifying the brokerage function and minimising risks of duplication between the residual local authority role and the EAS role is the priority
		Credibility of staff	🟨	• There has been a strong process for recruiting system leaders who are mainly high quality and a rigorous process with heads has ensured school buy-in • There are more questions to be addressed around quality on the curriculum side • The consortium's approach to performance management in schools must ensure that talent is developed and quality issues are addressed swiftly
		Capacity of partners	🟥	• There are some examples of strong networks of schools emerging around KS4 core subjects. The consortium have a strategy for sharing good practice • Many schools have quality issues that need addressing and the culture in schools to support other schools is a challenge • Developing the role of school-to-school support and the residual role of the local authority are the priorities
	Systems to deliver	Quality of planning	🟥	• Overall planning has been effective against fast-paced deadlines which was seen as necessary as part of signalling the change • Some of the pace of change has affected quality in the short-term e.g. an agreed budget plan is a gap, as is planning for some service delivery (14-19) • Thinking about the longer term timeline, pace for delivering core processes and filling gaps in planning are the priorities
		Coherent core processes	🟨	• The target setting tool looks very promising and the scaling up of the Newport school secure system is ensuring a systematic regional approach • Performance management of schools is unclear, problematic and has not been planned well • Clarifying the approach to performance management, whether done regionally or by each LA, and communicating the process is the priority
		Monitoring and evaluation	🟨	• Quality assurance processes are established at local and regional level and data is already being used effectively • Feedback from schools to the EAS appears to be missing and it is unclear whether there are mechanisms for collecting feedback in a systematic way • Establishing a feedback mechanism from schools to 'temperature check' delivery is a priority
		Use of data	🟩	• The performance team is strong, is making good use of the data available and producing systematic regional analyses of secondary school performance • Accessing data is an issue and there is a lack of clarity about the local authorities role on data and duplication with the EAS • Resolving the data access issue and ensuring the efficiency of processes is the priority going forward

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	Readiness		Score	Evidence and rationale
North Wales	Leadership to deliver	Clarity of vision	[amber/green]	• There is a strong vision that sets out the educational ambition, moral purpose and rationale for consortia working • Communication is the big challenge - some schools are not engaged yet (although it is questionable whether they need to be for the timescales set) • The next stage of developing the vision needs to set out more of the operational detail and the expectations for support
		Integrity of design	[amber/green]	• The design builds on the vision, is clear and is based on the context of the region and what has been working well already in local authorities • There is a need to clarify the support element of the design – many people thought they knew how it would work, but it is not clearly set out yet • The consortium need to clarify the design of the support function and roles and responsibilities of local authorities, hubs, RSIS and consortium
		Strength of leadership	[amber/green]	• The lack of certainty about the permanent appointment of a leader of RSIS has caused an issue with schools. A plan is in place to fill the vacancy • Communications with schools was strong at the start but has been absent in recent months – schools want to know where we are in process • The consortium is still in a key phase of consolidation and needs to use the opportunity to demonstrate renewed leadership to schools
		Rigour of governance	[amber/red]	• Shadow arrangements are in place and the Joint Committee has already met once and is working well but it is too early to judge effectiveness • Staff accountabilities and understanding of reporting arrangements are not completely clear yet and the operational detail needs development • The formal governance mechanisms need to be fully tested going forward and refined in light of the lessons learned
	Capacity to deliver	Level of resourcing	[amber/red]	• Recruitment of system leaders has been a positive and the commissioning budget approach offers good opportunities for securing extra support • Resource gaps are not having an impact on delivery but need to be filled and the impact of the system leader development work is yet to be seen • The consortium need to better understand the capacity gaps that need filling, especially around support and literacy/numeracy teams
		Clarity of roles and responsibilities	[amber/red]	• These are clear at a strategic level but greater clarity is needed at operational level, especially among schools and local authorities • The consortium have a number of sub-groups working on operational issues. It is critical that schools are engaged by them in next phase of design • Further work and thinking is needed on the boundaries between RSIS and LA roles and how schools shape the design of strategy
		Credibility of staff	[amber/green]	• The rigour of the recruitment process has been strong and schools involved in the process were positive about the selection criteria but other schools are still to be convinced that quality has improved, especially the perception issues around system leaders without headship experience • The consortium is confident it will have the right mix of skills and experience but will need to commission additional expertise as and when needed
		Capacity of partners	[amber/red]	• The consortium has the advantage of having access to a range of excellent practice and the capacity is already being used to address weaknesses • The challenge is building a culture amongst schools to share and release that expertise to develop effective school to school support • There is a need to focus on how the current approach to supporting other local authorities can be scaled up and be responsive to demand
	Systems to deliver	Quality of planning	[amber/green]	• The business plan sets out a clear timeline and the consortium have delivered against it, apart from the recruitment of a leader of the new service • The consortium now need to develop operational level plans that set out exactly how the challenge and support functions will work together • The sub-groups provide the opportunity to engage schools in the next phase of planning and the co-design of the operational detail
		Coherent core processes	[amber/green]	• New common processes are being implemented across all local authorities and the integrated MIS across all schools is an exciting prospect • Processes have been developed without extensive input from schools and there is a lack of clarity about how brokerage will work in practice • Defining the brokerage and commissioning of the support function in operational terms, and with close engagement of schools, is the priority
		Monitoring and evaluation	[amber/red]	• The consortium is unaware of the current views of schools so need to strengthen feedback loops and engagement of Heads in evaluating progress • A plan is in place to monitor consistency of implementation in the autumn term. No central system is in place that provides a school by school view • The consortium plan to use a headteacher reference group to provide feedback on implementation as an interim measure
		Use of data	[amber/green]	• The development of a common approach to the use of data over the last 12 months has been a strong area of improvement for the consortium • There is an opportunity to build on the development of a common MIS platform across all six LAs to develop real time feedback on pupil progress • The priority going forward is to ensure that the MIS developments maximise the potential to embed real-time pupil tracking in the ways of working

	Readiness		Score	Evidence and rationale
South West and Mid Wales	Leadership to deliver	Clarity of vision	🟨	• The vision is clear on paper, has a strong focus on outcomes and is considered to be well understood (but this still needs further testing) • Communicating the vision/telling the story clearly to schools and partners remains a challenge as it tends to be implicit and assumed • Sharpening the vision so that it can be articulated succinctly and more explicitly in communication is the priority going forward
		Integrity of design	🟨	• The model builds on a strong history of collaboration and the geography means a strong local presence is a priority for the model via the hubs • The model still needs testing to ensure there is sufficient capacity and that the partnership model can withstand current challenges in the region • Ensuring the hubs provide rigour and consistency in the delivery of regional approaches, including opportunities to formally integrate, is the priority
		Strength of leadership	🟧	• Collective leadership until recently has been strong but the collaborative model is currently being tested and is uncertain going forward • Changes to leadership, vacant director posts, significant challenges in two local authorities and no clear consortium response has created uncertainty • Ensuring short-term continuity and planning a future leadership model that is resilient to change is the priority
		Rigour of governance	🟧	• Historically, the routines and political leadership were considered as strengths but new cabinet members have only started meeting recently • Changes in political leadership have delayed routine governance and the key challenge is about the consistency of implementation/accountability • The priority going forward is to ensure implementation on the ground in each local authority is consistently rigorous and effective
	Capacity to deliver	Level of resourcing	🟧	• Overall levels of resource are sufficient but some vacant posts remain as a result of a high bar being maintained on the recruitment to CSIO posts • Challenges remain around the allocation of CSIO time, flexibility of their deployment, gaps in CSIO capacity and literacy and numeracy expertise • Refining the operational model for deploying capacity against need is the priority going forward
		Clarity of roles and responsibilities	🟨	• The operating model is clear on paper and underpinned by thorough documentation and protocols • There is a variation in understanding about the role of CSIOs and system leaders and how widespread the roles are understood by schools • Improving the communication with schools and building their understanding of roles is the priority
		Credibility of staff	🟧	• System leader capacity is felt to be strong and the selection process was rigorous. Some deployment challenges remain in terms of matching demand • There are concerns about the impact of a significant number of CSIOs to date • Developing the existing CSIOs and using performance management to ensure an ongoing focus on quality is the priority
		Capacity of partners	🟧	• Strong practice exists within the region and the system leader model is a good example of formal school-to-school support • Developing the capacity and culture to make best use of the practice and system leaders is a challenge and it is still early days • Growing the system leader model and continuing to scale-it up across the region is the priority going forward
	Systems to deliver	Quality of planning	🟨	• There is a lot of quality planning activity taking place and thorough documentation is in place, especially for getting to this stage of delivery • The focus of planning could be sharper and more precise and possibly more responsive/targeted to the schools which most need urgent support • Planning the deployment of CSIOs and building capacity to improve schools, especially those in the most challenging circumstances, are the priorities
		Coherent core processes	🟨	• Systems are well understood and performance management especially is very strong and being held up as effective practice nationally • Developing systems for allocating support is the main area for development, especially in targeting the schools facing the greatest challenges • Ensuring effective targeted support plans are in place and responsive to the needs of the most challenging schools is the priority
		Monitoring and evaluation	🟧	• The system leader feedback model is strong but this example needs to become the standard approach across the region • There is no formal school-level conversation about the quality of implementation or a central system that draws everything together systematically • Systematically understanding the effectiveness and variation in the implementation of the new approaches by local authorities is a priority
		Use of data	🟨	• The use of FFT on a regional basis for the first time and the development of data templates have led to greater consistency • The challenge is about the use and maturity of the new data approaches as it is still early days and they have been pulled together quickly • Ensuring that the data templates are more timely, comprehensive in depth of analysis and consistently applied across the region is the priority

Glossary of terms used

General

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

PM – Performance Management

MIS – Management Information System

FFT – Fischer Family Trust

Central South

LiNKS - Learning and Innovation Network for Schools

JES – Joint Education Service

ESIS – Education and School Improvement Service

HOVEP – Heads of the Valleys Education Programme

South Central

EAS – Education Achievement Service

North

RSEIS – Regional School Effectiveness and Improvement Service

South West and Mid

CSIO – Consortium School Improvement Officer