

# **A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS: A REGIONAL CASE STUDY OF DEVELOPING SYSTEM LEADERSHIP IN ACTION**

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## **Abstract**

*This article describes the process adopted through collaborative consortium working to pilot the implementation of the School Effectiveness Framework in Wales. The article explores how the continued development of collaborative working across a region of six independent local education authorities impacts on change through development, delivery and monitoring; and subsequently adds value to the work of each institution and local authority, ensuring that the systems developed make effective use of the resources available and maximise impact on standards at pupil, institutional, regional and national levels.*

## **Key Words**

**School Reform – School Improvement – School Effectiveness - System Change – System Leadership – Self-evaluation**

## **Introduction**

In 2008, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) invited the South West and Mid Wales Consortium (swamwac) to develop its own approach to implementing the National School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) (WAG, 2008) as part of the national pilot programme. The SEF has been designed to be an overarching framework intended to deliver a coherent approach to improving standards. It is based upon international research into the characteristics of high performing education systems and the ways in which system wide reform can be achieved nationally. It is referenced to international research by leaders in the field including Hopkins (2008), Barber and Fullan (2005), Caldwell (2006) and Harris (2008). Research cited in the SEF identifies that WAG recognises that the outcomes of pupil attainment is uneven. Hopkins (2009a) suggests that when considering the progress of individual schools, improvement tends to follow a natural progression; however, the intervention required to achieve improvement varies as to whether the progression is from 'awful' to 'adequate' from 'adequate' to 'good' or from 'good' to 'great' (ibid: 2009: 1)The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 provided a benchmark for the

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performance of the schools in Wales. It indicates that progress is uneven and the rate of that progress is insufficient if the educational outcomes for all children and young people in Wales is to be improved.

The Consortium welcomed the opportunity to develop an approach that would build upon established consortium working and be effective within the local context. The one-year pilot programme involved the six local authorities and selected schools from across the region. This paper describes the pilot, reports on the system thinking dimension of the SEF within a region of Wales, and considers the significance of system thinking in developing and implementing a national framework for school effectiveness. The paper explores the development of system leadership at school, local authority (LA) and regional level to achieve system wide change in response to the National policy framework. It looks particularly at the practical implementation of the key concepts of system thinking and system leadership at different levels - institutional, local, regional and national.

The regional picture broadly reflects that of Wales. It can be said that whilst overall the system could be considered to be 'adequate' there are elements that are 'good' or 'great' and a very small minority that are 'awful'. Analysis of the performance of schools based upon the outcome of the Estyn<sup>7</sup> Inspections of all schools inspected in the region between 2004-2008 83% of the schools, and the school performance data for all schools for the same period indicates that outcomes are uneven between schools in a LA and also across local authorities. There is a wide variation of inspection grades with outstanding features for each key question. There is a difference between the performance in the Primary Sector and Secondary Sector; however both sectors perform better than all Wales for some questions and not as well as all Wales on other questions. The picture is similar for pupil's performance. Thus it was clear that any approach developed would need to be able to respond to schools that are in different stages on the school improvement journey.

Swamwac is a successful, efficient collaboration of six of the twenty two Local Education Authorities within Wales. It embraces 635 schools and teaching services - a total of 32% of the schools in Wales and 28% of the pupil population. 48% of the schools are Welsh medium or bilingual and 52% of the schools are English medium with Welsh as a second language. A strength of the Consortium is this balance between urban and rural schools, smaller and larger schools, schools in affluent and socially deprived areas and Welsh and English language schools. The programme piloted by swamwac was developed through collaborative working between the six local authorities and involved LA school improvement officers and headteachers.

The swamwac SEF pilot development group comprises three headteachers nominated by the Consortium Headteacher Group and a senior officer from each authority, an assistant director, the consortium coordinator and an external consultant. The group developed an approach that built upon the existing work and considered the context of schools and local

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<sup>7</sup> **Estyn** is the office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

authorities, and embraced current WAG initiatives. The approach is firmly rooted in the principles outlined in the SEF and referenced to the 'National Purpose for Schools' (SEF, 2008: 8).

The group developed an approach that built upon the existing work of schools and local authorities and on current WAG initiatives; and was appropriate to the context of all schools across the Consortium. During development, there was a need to ensure a clear understanding of the circumstances of the schools and local authorities and the context in which they were working. The design and methodology of the approach needed to take consideration of, and be responsive to the aims, ethos and principles of the SEF.

The key principles on which the approach is based are derived directly from the SEF (2008). The core aims are to:

- Improve learning and wellbeing for all children and young people;
- Reduce variations in effectiveness within and between schools across the system as a whole;
- Raise overall levels of attainment and address the differences in outcomes within schools, between schools, between local authorities and between the primary and secondary phases;
- Promote commitment of schools, local authorities and national government to the national purpose for education;
- Align policies and practices through genuine dialogue and system thinking at all levels

There are three clear underpinning factors

- Collaborative (consortium) working
- The development of system leadership
- Tri-level working

### **Collaborative Consortium Working**

The South West and Mid Wales Consortium has developed a new, transferable model and governance structure for consortium working. This model is based upon the principle of close collaboration (rather than commercial outsourcing) to address key issues, sponsor innovation and improve efficiency. The Consortium's achievements to date suggest that it provides a model for regional collaboration and partnership working which accords with the distinctive character of Welsh Education Policy, and could be applied across the country. Most importantly the model has as its focus the improved standards and well being for all

children and young people. We recognise that no one way of working together fits every situation and the continuum provides the flexibility to ensure effective and efficient working that adds value to work of each authority. We define consortium working as the coming together in a range of ways of some or all services where each authority in the consortium retains the responsibility for statutory delivery and standards of the service. The work of the consortium is determined and supported by the six authorities.

### **System Leadership**

System leadership is an emerging concept that has been put forward by a number of innovators in the field of education that enables effective system change,

Collarbone and West-Burnham (2008), Hopkins (2009a) and Fullan (2005). Although there is no single definition, system leadership can be summarised as maximising the effect of leadership across a system so that there is a positive impact that creates a system better able to learn and improve for all learners, NCSL and Demos (2007). Many of the writers cited concentrate on the system leadership as it applies to schools and school leaders however the pilot approach is based upon the premise that for system leadership to achieve maximum impact then it should also be embedded in the practice at the LA and national level. For system change to be effective and embedded there needs to be a common understanding of the concept and system leaders need to operate at the three levels concurrently.

### **Tri- level Working**

Tri-level working is an approach to large scale and sustainable system change. It recognises a common focus of the three levels of the school system, schools, local authority and national government on improving the outcomes for children and young people. It also recognises the interdependence of the three levels. Barber and Fullan (2005) Tri-level working can support and is complimentary to the embedding of system leadership.

The approach was designed to enable schools to achieve improved effectiveness that impacts positively on standards. As such, it focused on the deeper characteristics and values of the school, including raising the aspirations of the whole school community. Swamwac's approach has five distinct phases as follows:

- Phase One      Understanding the School Context
- Phase Two      Agreeing Themes for Improvement and Barriers to Effectiveness
- Phase Three    Action Planning
- Phase Four     Implementation

## **Phase Five      Review and Planning for Sustainability**

The approach is a collaborative venture between schools, Local Authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government. The key to this approach is the partnership between the school, the Improvement Facilitator (IF) and the Link Adviser. Each has specific roles and responsibilities in achieving the outcomes of the pilot.

The roles of the IF and the Link Adviser are different but complementary and a professional partnership between the two is essential to the effective implementation of the pilot programme. The LA through the Link Adviser and other officers has an accountability role for all schools which includes the setting of targets, monitoring and targeted intervention. The IF's role with the school is primarily developmental, the aim of which is to facilitate the change required for the school to become a better school, through providing and accessing advice, support and professional challenge.

The support of the IF should add value to and enhance any support and intervention from the LA. Each LA will seek to align their procedures for advice, support, challenge and intervention to ensure that the work of the LA supports the School Effectiveness Framework and the school level pilot.

The role of consortium working is to lead and manage the approach being developed by the South West and Mid Wales Consortium

### **Underpinning Support and Guidance**

To promote a shared understanding and consistency of implementation of the approach written guidance was provided to the schools, the link advisers and the IFs. The guidance was in the form of hard copy files which were:-

- Guidance for Pilot Schools (2008b)
- Guidance for Link Advisers (2008c)
- Improvement Facilitator's Handbook (2008a)

The schools and Link Advisers attended separate one day briefing sessions to introduce the approach.

The IFs attended a five day training programme that encompassed knowledge and understanding of the approach and development of skills necessary for the role.

The guidance was also available to participating schools, Link Advisers and IFs on line from the consortium website, [www.swamwac.org](http://www.swamwac.org).

### **Selecting the participating schools**

The pilot involved schools from each of the local authorities (LAs) in the region and were a balanced representation from across the Consortium (representative in terms of rural/urban; primary/secondary/special; Welsh medium/bilingual/English; faith; size; performance). Each LA nominated up to 6 schools which formed a 'long' list which is representative of the regional context. The selection criteria for participating Schools were those provided by WAG. A total of 28 schools, including a Pupil Referral Unit participated in the pilot.

### The final profile of schools

	Primary	Secondary	Special	Total
Bilingual	9	4	0	13
English	7	6	2	15
Total	16	10	2	28

In practice, the LAs differed in the way in they managed this processes and approached schools to invite their participation. Some schools volunteered for the programme, through dialogue with the LA other Schools were nominated by the LA. However not all of the nominated schools were entirely 'willing volunteers' for the pilot. This proved useful in that experience of working with these schools will help to frame approaches with such schools for potential national roll-out of the programme. In some cases, schools were targeted by the LA

- to support the preparation for an impending Estyn Inspection;
- because they were viewed as 'coasting schools'; or
- because of indications of key weaknesses in their leadership or management.

The process through which schools were selected for participation was found to affect the eventual impact of the pilot upon some of the schools. This raises issues about the 'readiness' of schools to benefit from the programme, and the key characteristics of what 'readiness' looks like in terms of school performance and capacity for change. Related to this are the other contextual forces impacting on the school, for example, impending re-organisation of schools in the area and possible amalgamation/closure. However, the key variable in this seems to be the willingness of the Headteacher to engage with the process and the possibilities for school improvement.

### Phase One

This was a school-led process using existing evidence from school self-evaluation processes. All schools in the pilot programme conducted an initial self-evaluation against the SEF. Schools were responsible for leading and managing this phase based upon their individual circumstances and ongoing systems for self-evaluation and review. These systems provide substantial evidence directly relevant to the consideration of the core themes and key elements of the SEF. The framework is designed to look deep into the life and work of the school and focus upon those key systems and values that are central to sustained school improvement. The guidance encouraged schools to ensure that their review process reflects best practice as identified by Estyn in terms of the leadership and management of self-evaluation.

Schools adopted a collaborative review process that enabled them to consider existing evidence against the evaluation criteria within the SEF. This focused upon six key elements of school effectiveness, which are:

- Leadership
- Curriculum and teaching
- Working with others
- Networks of professional practice
- Intervention and support
- Improvement and accountability

The use of the SEF was sometimes the first opportunity that schools had to formally review their current work against some of the criteria, and to reflect upon areas which they may wish to improve. Schools themselves decide how they would like to manage the collaborative review process in terms of information gathering, recording and stakeholder involvement..

Many of the criteria within the SEF are qualitative and involve making informed judgements about the characteristics of the school. The effective self evaluation in the context of the SEF required a high level of stakeholder involvement that provides feedback on their perceptions of the school and its effectiveness.

This phase marked the start of the school's developing relationship with their IF. The IFs provided guidance and support to individual schools as they evaluated selected elements of the SEF. During this phase the IF established a professional relationship with the school, analysed performance data and documentary evidence and offered support through the self-evaluation process. The IF also liaised with the school's LA Link Adviser.

In the school perception survey, all the schools reported that they had engaged in a rigorous self-evaluation that was based on performance data and additional sources of evidence related to the SEP.

Schools varied in their approach to completion of the SEP. Two schools partially completed selected sections, whilst all the other schools completed all the elements of the SEP. The elements that were chosen for partial completion were Leadership and Curriculum and Teaching; the schools which chose these elements did so because their existing self-evaluation had identified these as priority areas for development. This proved to be an effective strategy, in that it enabled the school to focus quickly on the key areas of need (as previously identified) and consider the selected element in depth.

### **Phase Two: Agreeing Themes for Improvement and Barriers to Effectiveness**

The next phase in the cycle was for the school to have a dialogue with the LA Link Advisor and an IF on the self-evaluation and agree the 'Themes for Improvement', 'Key Strengths' and 'Barriers to Effectiveness'. This partnership between the school and the IF led to the preparation of an action plan setting out a series of objectives relating to the school's selected themes.

This was the opportunity for the IF to meet with the headteacher and others to identify the key focus of the work to be undertaken, to clarify the outcomes of the self-evaluation undertaken by the school and to identify the key themes for improvement. In most cases, the school's LA Link Adviser also attended the dialogue meeting by invitation of the headteacher.

The guiding principles for this discussion were that it should be:

- A developmental and constructive process, based upon professional dialogue;
- Focused directly upon pupils' learning and well-being, and the complex factors that influence this;
- Informed by both quantitative and qualitative evidence related to the key elements of the SEF;
- Based upon respect for the school's achievements and its right to determine appropriate directions for school improvement

The themes were primarily concerned with 'capacity building', focused on the development of new systems, networks and cultures that will enable the school to become more effective over time and directly related to desired outcomes in terms of pupils' achievements and well-being.

### **Phase Three: Action Planning and Phase Four: Implementation**

WAG identified the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) both in individual schools and across the networks of schools as a key enabler of change. This is linked directly to the concept of 'system-building' and the need to promote networks that

will work together to identify good practice and share this across schools. Research demonstrates that PLCs benefit from the extended knowledge base that can be drawn upon through broader involvement of different stakeholder groups in the learning process (Stoll and Lewis, 2007). Funding was made available specifically to enable the establishment of PLCs.

The key element of this phase is the empowerment of the school to plan for effective change that will contribute to improving standards of all pupils. The IF acts as a coach to the headteacher and as a critical friend in supporting the whole school community in achieving the planned change, and is also important in the development of PLCs. Each school prepares a draft action plan which identifies key objectives for development, steps to be taken to achieve each objective, timescales and milestones for development activity, key roles and responsibilities, resources required, and arrangements for monitoring and evaluation. The next stage of the process is to involve the network of schools as a PLC to refine these draft action plans and establish a way of working collaboratively to provide peer challenge and support in securing each school's objectives. In preparation for this, each school is asked to identify:

- The key areas in which they would benefit from challenge and support from another school (or schools);
- The key areas in which they feel they could challenge and support other schools, on the basis of existing good practice in their own school;
- The ways in which they would like to work collaboratively with other schools.

A meeting was held with the IFs in November 2008 to identify potential networks, although not all Dialogue Meetings had been completed at that time. From this, a suggested clustering of schools was prepared as a starting-point for negotiation. Schools were clustered into networks based on their characteristics and identified themes for development. 11 communities were created.

In terms of the focus of work undertaken by the PLCs, amongst the primary schools, the main themes were:

- Embedding assessment for learning across the school;
- Developing pupil tracking systems and the use of performance data to inform improvement planning;
- Personalising learning and developing independent learners;

In the secondary schools, the main focus of work was on:

- Distributing leadership and empowering middle leaders;
- Developing the core role and key accountabilities of middle leaders.

For two secondary schools, it was not possible to create a PLC with other schools that was directly focused on their selected themes for improvement (e.g. responding to community needs and raising the aspirations of boys in Key Stages 3 and 4). In such cases, it proved useful for the IF and headteacher to broker visits and contacts with other schools (not in the pilot programme) that were working in similar areas or already demonstrating good practice

Following clear guidance, each network of schools worked together to produce a shared spending plan for its activities as a PLC. Networks drew heavily on the guidance provided in terms of the range of different kinds of collaborative learning activities. These activities included:

- Collaborative planning meetings;
- Reciprocal learning visits to schools in the network, focused on a selected theme;
- Learning visits to other schools demonstrating effective practice in a selected theme;
- Shared professional learning events – presentations and CPD programmes;
- Collaborative evaluation and review meetings.

Few schools purchased additional consultative support from external sources preferring to continue to work closely with their IFs. Another key feature of the process was that on several occasions, the school of the IF also participated directly in the networked activities, bringing an additional resource to bear on the collaborative learning of the group.

The networked PLCs engaged in a range of different learning and development activities. Initially, the most widely used technique was that of the 'learning visit', where one of the schools in the network hosted visitors from the other schools to observe and discuss an area of good practice. This often led to series of learning visits that transformed into an evolving programme of collaborative learning. Increasingly, the visit was used as a stimulus to develop further an ongoing dialogue about opportunities for school improvement. Schools then took the learning from this dialogue, and trialled/adapted approaches in their own school settings. A key lesson from this was that frequently the benefits for participants were unexpected, that collaborative work opened up possibilities for further development which had not been anticipated. In particular, schools which already demonstrated good practice in a specific area still learned from others how to enhance their work even further.

It is possible to analyse the networks in terms of three models of knowledge management, as shown below (adapted from Jackson and Temperley, 2007). The development of the PLCs was drawn from a form of knowledge management involving schools and other agencies working on common enquiry-based projects that involve a high level of peer guidance and support.

Model One: knowledge transfer	'Learning from another'
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Knowledge creation Single school 'best practice'	→	Transfer Packaging: 'case studies' Linear relationship (centre-periphery change strategy)	→	Application/rejection by other schools
<b>Model Two: knowledge sharing</b>		<b>'Learning from one another'</b>		
Knowledge creation/sharing Parallel agendas	→ ←	Social networks 'Communities of practice' Trust/dialogue Knowledge exchange	→ ←	Adaptation/innovation Review/routinisation
<b>Model Three: Co-construction of knowledge</b>		<b>'Learning with one another'</b>		
Shared agendas Disciplined innovation Common innovation projects	↔	Collaborative problem-solving Peer guidance and support Enquiry-based activity across network	↔	Peer review  System-wide learning Embedding innovation
<b>Adapted from Jackson and Temperley (2007)</b>				

### Phase Five: Review and planning for sustainability

During the final phase, the IF works with the school to support the preparation of the summative report on the progression made through the pilot. A key aspect of this work is the revisiting of the SEP, enabling the school to identify and demonstrate progression made through the pilot. The review is to provide a forum that enables the school and IF collaboratively to review achievements through the process, identifying experiences that can inform further development of the SEF. The review includes a focus on the work of the network of schools and the development of PLCs.

### Leadership and Management of the Pilot Programme

Each of the five phases has a focus point where the activity of the school and IF are reviewed against agreed outcomes for the phase. This structured approach to the pilot project and work **with schools** is also underpinned by a series of guidance documents, including a detailed Improvement Facilitator Handbook. This led in some quarters nationally to the criticism that the model was too prescriptive and sought to 'micro-manage' the work of the IFs. However, feedback from the IFs themselves has indicated that they found this to be an invaluable resource. It was regarded as a key reference-point that could be used to guide further actions; it was not seen as an inflexible framework, but one that enabled them to make choices according to the needs of the school.

An aspect of the management of pilot that proved to be more contentious was the reporting requirements placed on the IFs. This was partly to ensure that the pilot generated evidence of what had been achieved to inform future practice, and partly to meet accountability needs and audit requirements. In terms of guidance and support, several IFs consulted with

the consortium coordinators as the pilot progressed. There was also much evidence of peer support between the Facilitators, particularly those involved in working together to support PLCs. A series of review meetings also provided the Facilitators with the opportunity to discuss areas of concern and identify potential solutions. Where there were opportunities for the observation of the Facilitators at work, this gave scope for supportive guidance. Review meetings with individual Facilitators also provided the chance to affirm their action and discuss potential options for action.

Guidance materials and briefing sessions were also provided for participating schools and headteachers. These sometimes proved to be less successful, and a number of Facilitators felt that schools had not always been prepared properly for their participation in the pilot. They advocated additional sessions led by themselves with the schools they would work with to raise awareness of the School Effectiveness Framework and its underlying thinking.

Schools and IFs raised a series of important issues relating to the leadership and management of the pilot programme:

- The guidance materials were welcomed by IFs, who did not regard them as inflexible, but as a useful resource to be adapted according to need;
- The reporting requirements on Improvement Facilitators proved to be onerous and should be reviewed to make them more streamlined;
- Increasing use of monitoring visits and formative feedback would enhance the management of the project and support for Facilitators;
- One-to-one review sessions and structured interviews with Facilitators proved to be an effective way to capture complementary evidence of their work in schools (and thereby reduce the reporting burden on them).

### **Alignment of LA policies and procedures with the SEF**

From the outset, it was recognised that the pilot involved both local authorities and schools and that the local authorities would also begin to identify ways to align their procedures as part of the approach. This builds upon Fullan's (2006) proposition that in order to achieve successful and sustainable improvement it is essential that what happens at school level also needs to occur at district level and national level. The key areas for alignment were identified as the annual LA monitoring and target setting meeting with schools and the process for support and challenge. It was also seen as important that the pilot process added value to the relationship and support provided by the LA. For this to happen, there needed to be a common understanding of the relative roles of the IF and the LA Link Adviser.

All pilot schools were committed to the principle of integrating the Autumn Term 'support and challenge' visit with the dialogue meeting, so that there was a single conversation based upon the same criteria and using the same evidence base. The main barrier to achieving an integrated visit reported by the schools, IFs and LA link advisers was the timescale and the timing of the pilot.

## **The role of the Improvement Facilitator**

The Handbook for IFs set out a framework for their work with schools, and within this there was considerable scope to adapt the role and adopt intervention strategies according to the perceived needs of the school. Within their preparatory induction and training programme, the SEF pilot development group considered a range of strategies that included coaching, mentoring and facilitation skills. This resulted in considerable skills needed by IFs, who were in effect both serving the broader needs of the school and negotiating a constructive and professional relationship with the headteacher.

IFs were required to work within a clear set of expectations which indicated that they should:

- Support the pilot schools to understand the SEF and its application to the context of the school by engaging in genuine dialogue;
- Be focused on improving the outcomes for all pupils and the many factors which influence pupil attainment, achievement and well being;
- Provide professional challenge and support;
- Respect the school's autonomy to plan its development;
- Work in partnership with the link adviser in supporting on school improvement issues;
- Carry out their work with integrity, treat others with courtesy and respect and be transparent in their dealings with schools, local authorities and the consortium;
- Support the school in developing professional learning communities within the school and facilitate the development of professional learning communities between schools.

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## **Findings and Impact of the pilot programme**

### **Phase 1**

Analysis of the documentary evidence and feedback from the IFs indicates that the quality and depth of the evaluation process was highly variable. Some schools conducted an in-depth evaluation across all of the key elements of the SEF; they involved different groups in the process, identified and reviewed the evidence available, and arrived at shared judgements about potential themes for improvement. In a very few cases, the process was far more cursory, and judgements rested on the assertion of the headteacher or a small group of senior staff at the school. There was limited reference to the underpinning evidence to inform judgements.

The schools were not always able to involve a wide range of stakeholders in the self-evaluation; the main barrier to this was reported as the timescale of the pilot, which meant that the time available to complete the self-evaluation did not facilitate the involvement of the wider school staff, governors, parents or partners. Many schools reported involving the SMT who met and considered data and the evidence available in the school to verify the

judgements. The timing of the process in the school-year was also identified as a key issue by many schools, and they indicated that the completion of the SEF self-evaluation should be aligned to the school's annual evaluation and improvement planning cycle.

Many schools felt that the self-evaluation process based on the SEP led to valuable discussions about the school's characteristics and capacity for improvement, whilst the process used reflected their existing approach to self evaluation the statements in the SEP provided an opportunity to identify gaps. There were mixed views on the support provided from the IF on the conduct of the self-evaluation. 70% of the schools felt that the written guidance for IFs was not as helpful as it could have been in supporting schools in conducting the self-evaluation against the SEP.

There was discussion of school performance data in completion of the SEP, this was often fairly limited in scope. There was a delay in the production of the school data profiles by DCELLS, however, a range of other data was readily available from schools. These were not extensively used to prepare for the Dialogue Meeting to identify themes for improvement. The perception from the schools was that this data was already known to them, and the key issues in the performance of the school were already being addressed through the school improvement plans. The focus of the dialogue meeting, and identification of themes for improvement, was primarily centred on the discussion of the qualitative indicators in the SEP.

Schools and IFs raised a series of issues for further development of the initial self-evaluation process:

- Further consideration is needed on the timing of the process, to ensure that it fits seamlessly with the cycle of school improvement activities across the school year;
- IFs advocated further consideration of the way in which the use of the SEP linked with schools' existing self-evaluation processes, and of the use of school performance data within this;
- The timescales for the pilot programme made it difficult for schools to involve a range of stakeholders (including other agencies) in the process; it was felt that more time would have made it possible to involve others in the dialogue;
- The written guidance on the self-evaluation and the use of the SEP requires improvement.

## **Phase 2**

Most schools focused on a small number of specific key elements. In some cases, the selected themes were not mapped closely against the level descriptors in the SEP, and the latter were not overtly used in setting outcomes in schools' action plans. This indicates a need to provide IFs with additional guidance and support on using the SEP to frame themes for improvement, and to work with schools to translate these into concise objectives for action planning. Interviews with the IFs at the end of pilot revealed there had been few conflicting views over the selection of appropriate themes for each school. Where the IFs felt that underlying issues (for example, in school leadership and management) were not

being addressed, they held their counsel and decided to return to those issues as the opportunity emerged, and as their relationship with the headteacher deepened.

Many schools prepared an action plan aligned with selected elements of the SEF, although these varied in terms of quality and level of detail. In a small number of cases, schools formed innovation networks and negotiated combined action/spending plans for the group, rather than developing their own separate plan.

The following analysis identifies the overall pattern of themes across the six key elements of the SEF. It should be noted that repetition in the design of the SEP results in specific themes sometimes being located in more than one key element.

<b>Primary schools: Summary of themes identified</b>		
<b>No. Refs</b>	<b>Key element of SEF</b>	<b>Examples of themes identified</b>
11	Improvement and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving systems of classroom observation</li> <li>Monitoring pupil progress</li> <li>Analysing assessment data to identify priorities for school improvement</li> <li>Improving performance management systems</li> <li>Reducing variation: identifying/sharing good practice</li> <li>Sharing data, involving parents/carers</li> </ul>
7	Curriculum and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personalised learning</li> <li>Integrated curriculum</li> <li>Developing independent learning</li> <li>Developing creative curriculum</li> <li>Improving assessment systems</li> <li>Assessment for learning</li> <li>Curriculum coordination + planning</li> </ul>
3	Intervention and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pupil involvement in target setting</li> <li>Improving quality of data (standardisation)</li> <li>Developing pupil tracking</li> <li>Improving use of data</li> </ul>
3	Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing school's vision for learning</li> <li>Developing leadership role of Governing body</li> <li>Setting high expectations for staff</li> <li>Building leadership capacity</li> <li>Distributing leadership</li> </ul>
3	Working with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community-focused schooling</li> <li>Achieving the 7 core aims (CYPP<sup>8</sup>)</li> <li>Developing social partnerships and providing additional services</li> <li>Meeting needs of parents and community</li> </ul>
2	Networks of professional practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing dialogue about expectations of staff – shared vision for learning</li> <li>Investigating and improving pedagogy</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary and special education settings: Summary of themes identified</b>		
8	Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building leadership capacity</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Children and Young People's Partnership

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering middle leaders</li> <li>• Distributing leadership</li> <li>• Leadership training programmes</li> </ul>
5	Improvement and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing use of classroom observation</li> <li>• Addressing in-school variation</li> <li>• Improving performance management: middle leaders</li> <li>• Using data to improve performance</li> <li>• Setting and achieving targets</li> <li>• Improving pupil/parent involvement in target-setting</li> </ul>
3	Curriculum and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapting curriculum to learners' needs</li> <li>• Developing learner voice</li> <li>• Tackling underachievement of boys</li> <li>• Curriculum development to increase motivation and achieve potential</li> </ul>
3	Working with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on community needs</li> <li>• Engaging parents</li> <li>• Aligning/collaborating with other providers – 14-19 provision</li> <li>• Planning responsive curriculum</li> <li>• Community-focused developments</li> </ul>
3	Networks of professional practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deepening collective responsibility</li> <li>• Developing shared understanding: middle leader role</li> <li>• Learning from best practice - in-school variation</li> <li>• Developing an enquiry-based approach to school improvement</li> </ul>
1	Intervention and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving quality/use of data KS2/3</li> </ul>

Schools and IFs raised a series of important issues relating to the identification of themes for improvement and planning the action to achieve these:

- The identified themes for improvement and action plans were not closely aligned to the development framework and descriptors contained in the SEP; further consideration should be given to the way in which the SEP can be used to frame improvement objectives more concisely;
- Schools faced difficulties in framing measurable success criteria in many of their action plans.

The guidance document for schools suggested key areas for inclusion in action plans, but did not prescribe a particular model. In a minority of cases, anticipated outcomes were directly related to improvement in pupil learning and wellbeing, but more frequently action plans focused on areas which had a tangential (but potentially significant) impact on pupil attainment. Key examples of this were action plans designed to improve systems or build capacity in areas such as assessment, community focus, and personalised learning.

It was clear from the school satisfaction survey that the vast majority of schools felt that the dialogue meeting was a critical element in the effectiveness of the approach and had led to the identification of challenging and purposeful themes for improvement for the school. The IF had helped to facilitate the identification of themes for development and the support they

needed in preparing the action plan. Most schools also reported that the school's Link Adviser made a positive contribution to the dialogue meeting.

### **Phase 3**

In practice, some IFs were more proactive than others in negotiating networked PLCs and initiating a meeting to engage in collaborative discussion. This delay caused frustration in some networks of schools, and in a very few cases, contacts with schools beyond the network of pilot schools were made to provide access to best practice. In some cases, it proved difficult initially to align individual action plans with shared development activity. Individual work with schools continued alongside the collaborative development involving the network of schools. In some cases, the PLCs were fairly fluid, linking with other PLCs on the pilot, and involving other schools in the process. The application of the knowledge management model to the development of the PLCs suggests that there was significant knowledge transfer, primarily through the use of learning visits.

The majority of the network PLCs engaged in a broad range of activities, and schools reported that they had experienced 'fantastic learning' which had a positive impact on school practice. The networks provided good peer support and challenge to most of the pilot schools and the IFs were effective in facilitating the networks. The outcome was that the majority of networks achieved a high level of collaborative development.

Schools and IFs raised a series of important issues relating to the networked PLCs:

- Schools should be made aware of the selected themes for improvement and networked development activity of all of the PLCs in the pilot programme, to facilitate further opportunities for collaboration.
- One outcome from the pilot should be the compilation of a database of 'good practice establishments' that could be accessed in the action planning phase, to raise awareness of potential options for school improvement. This would enable schools that have an identified theme for improvement to visit a school where good practice is already embedded; this could lead to a further source of consultative support.
- Further action could be taken at Consortium level to promote higher levels of knowledge management, by raising the awareness of pilot schools and IFs of enquiry-based approaches to shared innovation projects.

One school reported that the school selected by the IF for the learning visit was not appropriate, in that it served a very different setting. In the school perception survey, most of the schools reported that they were happy with the process used by the consortium in clustering the schools to form networked learning communities. Resources permitting, schools noted their wish to extend the involvement of others in their networked PLCs. Feedback indicates that the establishment of PLCs was the most positive aspect of the pilot.

### **Evaluation**

The school satisfaction survey confirmed that the schools' response to the work of the IF was overwhelmingly positive:

- The majority of schools felt that the IF had formed a purposeful and sustained professional relationship with the school and in particular with the Headteacher;
- The involvement of the IF was viewed to have added value to improvement processes in the majority of schools;
- The majority of headteachers felt that they had benefited personally from the professional peer support and challenge provided by their Improvement Facilitator;
- The IFs used a range of coaching and facilitating skills in working with the schools, including leading the mid-term review effectively;
- In most cases, the IF was successful in brokering appropriate additional support for the school.

Feedback from IFs about their role revealed that a range of different strategies were used to provide challenge and support, and that these were based on a sensitive reading of the needs of the school and headteacher. One IF described how he found himself re-thinking his role and changing direction during the course of his work with one school; he questioned how best to approach the role with one 'reluctant' headteacher and shifted from 'supportive professional' to 'rigorous pace-setting'. His key concern was to encourage the headteacher to take more responsibility for school improvement and become more proactive in learning from other schools and working collaboratively. The onus of reporting fell on the shoulders of the IFs, many of whom found the demands to be excessive. There is clearly a place for streamlining these reporting requirements in any further initiatives. Some Facilitators (particularly those who were new to consultative responsibility) reported that they felt isolated at times and would have welcomed more opportunities for feedback and support.

The impact of the pilot experience is that the LAs have agreed to develop a core 'Challenge and Intervention' framework across the consortium, with agreed procedures that will be used in all authorities.

### **The impact of the pilot on participating schools**

At the time of the school perception survey in September 2009, one third of the schools had completed their final review with the IF. Half of the schools felt that their involvement in the pilot has resulted in measureable improvements in pupil learning, progress and wellbeing. Some schools noted that it was too soon to be able to measure improvements in pupil progress. All schools felt that involvement in the pilot had increased the capacity of the school to secure further improvements in pupil performance in the future. However, although the majority of schools were positive about their involvement in the pilot, a small minority of schools felt that they had reservations about their participation.

In a minority of cases, anticipated outcomes were directly related to improvement in pupil learning and wellbeing, but more frequently action plans focused on areas which had a tangential (but potentially significant) impact on pupil attainment. Key examples of this were action plans designed to improve systems or build capacity in areas such as assessment, community focus, and personalised learning. Much of the SEF currently focuses on the developing the characteristics of effective schools: building new structures, cultures

and relationships, rather than addressing key performance issues in a more direct manner. There is further scope for linking the development of these key characteristics more directly to securing improvements in the performance of the school.

A positive outcome from one network learning community of three secondary schools was the pupil involvement in learning communities both within a school and between schools. The three schools concerned pursued pupil involvement with rigour by expanding on the pupil friendly version of the SEP. The 'pupil version' was used as a catalyst for discussion and debate at pupil level, between pupils and staff and between staff. It was reported that within the timescale of the pilot there was an impact on standards that included tangible positive outcomes.

The impact of participation on the schools fell into four broad categories:

Where there had been a direct impact on an aspect of school performance, in terms of the standards achieved by learners or their wellbeing;

Where the school had 'built capacity' for further improvement, for example, by developing the professional awareness and role of middle leaders;

Where the school had engaged in 'systems development' and established new processes and procedures for doing things, for example, in terms of managing attendance or assessment for learning;

Where the themes were 'values-driven' and focused on improving the professional culture of the school and relationships between key stakeholders, for example, in terms of building a shared commitment to a new way of working or developing the capacity of the school to empower pupils and listen to learner voice.

Whereas many schools identified clear progression from their baseline and felt they had met the outcomes identified in their action plans, there was also often a sense of unfinished business. This was partly related to the truncated development timescales in the pilot programme; many schools and LFs felt that lasting and profound changes could not be effected in what amounted in most cases to two school terms of development activity. This led some to question the design of an 'entitlement' model which gives access to peer challenge and support for one year.

### **Conclusions arising from the swamwac approach to the SEF pilot programme**

1. The schools varied in their willingness and 'readiness' for participation in the programme, and there was evidence that the way in which schools were selected impacted upon the benefits they gained.
2. Participating schools were initially sceptical about the use of the SEP and doubted whether it added value to the existing Estyn Inspection Framework.
3. The framing of 'themes for improvement' was primarily shaped by the SEP, and its descriptors of the characteristics of effective schools; few schools overtly drew upon the analysis of school performance data.
4. 50% of the schools reported that they had achieved measurable improvements in terms of standards or wellbeing. The majority of schools achieved outcomes in terms of

building capacity, developing systems and deepening commitment to core vision and values.

5. In the participating secondary schools the primary focus of work was on distributed leadership, empowering middle leaders and improving accountability systems; in the primary schools it was on curriculum innovation and improving systems of classroom observation, monitoring pupil progress and using assessment data.
6. The IFs worked within a consistent framework for the pilot programme, but adapted their intervention strategies according to the needs of the schools and headteachers with which they were working.
7. Some of the pilot schools involved a broad range of stakeholders in the development process, although there was limited engagement with other agencies and community groups.
8. There were wide variations in the level and form of participation by LA Link Advisers.
9. The pilot demonstrated the potential contribution of headteachers (and others with recent headship experience) as providers of system leadership in the form of consultative support for their peers.
10. The headteachers fulfilling this role found it to be a challenging one that extended their professional expertise; they also reported that there were clear benefits for themselves and for their own schools.
11. There are limitations on the potential capacity of the deployment of headteachers in systems leader role, both in terms of the number of headteachers capable of fulfilling this role effectively, and on the number of heads who could potentially support such activity without jeopardising their own school leadership role and their school's effectiveness.
12. Participating schools felt that their participation in the networked professional learning community provided the greatest benefits for their school, and were most keen to see such opportunities developed in the future.
13. The professional learning and capacity building that occurred within these innovation networks was often unanticipated, with valuable opportunities for further development in those schools which were already regarded as demonstrating good practice in a specific area.
14. The most effective innovation networks moved beyond a model based on the transfer of good practice to another towards deeper models of collaborative development.
15. The pilot brought together three different ways of building lateral capacity:
  - through a structured programme work to secure improvement in relation to a new school self-evaluation framework;
  - through the consultative support of a peer headteacher,
  - through participation in an innovation network
16. In the future, it would be possible to disaggregate these different ways of building lateral capacity and generate a range of opportunities for peer support and challenge.
17. The further development of new strategies for building lateral capacity and providing peer support and challenge should be based upon a thorough review of the current national and local arrangements for holding schools to account and promoting improved effectiveness.

18. Such a review should focus on the degree of fit – or integration – between the various elements of the system, at both national and local levels, and also take capacity issues into account.
19. A tri-level system of accountability and improvement must have the capability to respond to the diverse needs of schools, their current effectiveness, improvement trajectories and capacity for improvement.
20. It should be possible to map these trajectories and adapt the mode of intervention and support to their specific needs and circumstances. A broader range of different strategies are needed, including action learning partnerships for high-performing schools, the brokerage of specialist support for schools working on particular areas of development, and school-to-school support federations for schools requiring improvement (Hill, 2008).

#### **Further development of the swamwac SEF model**

WAG, in a response to the Association of Directors of Education for Wales (ADEW), funded the development and pilot of a quality mark scheme which recognises the achievements of schools and other learning settings to become genuinely inclusive. Schools in Wales are given guidance on what is expected of them in terms of inclusive education by WAG's statutory and non-statutory documentation. The foundations of the Inclusive Schools Award for Wales (ISAW) are based on the SEF. The ISAW also embraces WAG's seven core aims in a rights-based approach to meeting pupil needs in *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* (2004). At its centre is the moral purpose of a shared responsibility for improving standards of attainment and achievement of all learners, the development of system thinking and leadership and the aspiration of an inclusive bilingual society. The award recognises that the achievement of an inclusive society begins with the development of a truly inclusive education system.

The ISAW mirrors the swamwac SEF model in that it seeks to establish a common language for discussion within and across schools in a PLC; setting out expectations and ambitions for inclusive culture, policy and practice in schools.

#### **Final comments**

It should be noted that much of the SEF currently focuses on the developing the characteristics of effective schools: building new structures, cultures and relationships, rather than addressing key performance issues in a more direct manner. There is further scope for linking the development of these key characteristics more directly to securing improvements in the performance of the school.

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