

Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee

ELLS(2) 12-06(p1) Annex B

The Welsh Assembly Government's response to the report of the National Assembly Audit Committee's report on Administration of Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) and the Better Schools Fund: Committee Report (2) 04-06

The Welsh Assembly Government welcome the findings of the report and offers the following responses to the seven recommendations

1	In consultation with LEAs, moves to a three-year planning cycle for planning, funding and managing the Better Schools Fund as soon as practicable.
	<p>Accepted. The Assembly Government is working towards introducing 3 year revenue funding settlements for local authorities in Wales from 2008-9 and a requirement on local authorities to set 3 year budgets for schools .</p> <p>However, the strength of the Better Schools Fund is that it has the flexibility to move funding from year to year in support of emerging priorities, including issues identified in HM Chief Inspector's annual reports. This will need to be retained within an over-arching three year planning cycle.</p>
2	Review, with LEAs, the extent to which the summer development activities have been hampered by the planning cycle and, if the extent is significant, amend the cycle accordingly.
	Accepted. We will review with authorities during the Autumn term 2006 what factors affect the delivery and take up of development activities during the summer term. We will also work with authorities to identify what arrangements might need to be put in place to address any difficulties, including changes to the planning cycle.
3	In deploying its resources, takes into account the risks to the effectiveness of the Better Schools Fund that could arise from lack of resilience in the Better Schools Fund team.

	<p>Accepted. The Better Schools Fund team succeeded in meeting all the key planning milestones for the 2006-7 programme and is on target to meet those for 2007-8. This is a direct result of steps which have been taken over the past two years to increase the resilience of the Better Schools Fund team, build closer working relationships with local authorities and improve accountability.</p> <p>Any decisions about future staff resources will take account of the risks to proper delivery of and accountability for the Better Schools Fund.</p> <p>In addition, the senior management of DELLS is looking at innovative ways of working, in particular drawing on expertise across the Department to provide additional support as necessary on a short term basis to small teams such as the Better Schools Fund team. This is expected to be in place by the end of 2006.</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>Encourages those policy leads that are best placed to explain changes in the programme to attend meetings with LEAs to give such explanations. Such attendance should be set out in an annual published consultation timetable.</p>
	<p>Accepted. It will become a standing requirement that policy leads attend the annual consultation meeting with LEAs. The consultation timetable which is shared at the start of the financial year with local authorities will also be made available on the Assembly Government website.</p> <p>Additionally, the DELLS senior management team has recently considered the overall roles and responsibilities of the Better Schools Fund team and policy leads and these will be set out in formal guidance in September 2006.</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>Draws up appropriate guidance for policy leads. This should include standards for the quality of evidence needed to determine whether the criteria for the assessment of spending plans have been met. The guidance should also set out how policy leads should make best use of Estyn pre-assessments and local evaluation reports.</p>
	<p>Accepted. The Assembly Government has awarded a contract to independent consultants, Tribal, for the delivery in September 2006 of an evaluation workshop for policy leads and local authorities and the production by December 2006 of a Better Schools Fund evaluation handbook.</p> <p>In addition, the contract includes provision of advice to the Assembly Government on management information requirements for the Better Schools Fund; how to ensure that there are clear links between local and national evaluation; and minimum standards of information on evaluation to be provided by local authorities in their annual BSF spending plans. This advice will inform guidance to policy leads on the assessment of spending plans which will be issued in October 2006, including guidance on the use of Estyn pre-assessments.</p>
<p>6</p>	<p>Secures training and professional advice on evaluation for its policy leads.</p>

	<p>Accepted. This recommendation will be addressed through delivery of the evaluation workshop and handbook being prepared by Tribal. It will also become a requirement for policy leads to undertake formal evaluation training. The Better Schools Fund team, who also have policy lead responsibilities for a number of activities in the programme, have already attended evaluation training provided by the UK Evaluation Society.</p> <p>Further ongoing evaluation of the Better Schools Fund will be developed in collaboration with the Intelligence and Marketing team in DELLS. The IM team will offer a full support service to the Better Schools Fund team and will assist in the evaluation process.</p>
<p>7</p>	<p>Draws on external expertise, from both LEAs and independent sources, to develop guidance for LEAs on how evaluation should be carried out. It should also make minimum standards of evaluation by LEAs a condition of grant funding.</p>
	<p>Accepted. This recommendation will initially be addressed through delivery of the evaluation workshop and handbook being prepared by Tribal. We will then review the implementation of the guidance with LEAs during the spring and summer terms 2007 and draw on the outcome of that review to establish what changes in grant conditions are required for the 2008-9 programme onwards. These will be set out with the draft circular which will be issued in June 2008.</p> <p>The reasons for this approach are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the need to secure a common understanding with LEAs of what constitutes good evaluation in the context of the Better Schools Fund before building this into grant terms and conditions. ● the need to ensure that the guidance in the evaluation handbook has been effectively rolled-out and tested. <p>Planning for the 2007-8 programme is already well advanced, with LEAs due to submit their BSF spending plans in November. Tribal will be working alongside authorities to advise them on evaluation issues as they prepare their spending plans. Lessons learned during this period will also inform the content of the evaluation handbook which is to be published in December. Beyond that the implications for evaluation of moving to a 3 year planning cycle (see the response to recommendation 1) will be considered.</p>