



Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales

Cofnod y Trafodion The Record of Proceedings

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[The Public Accounts Committee](#)

15/5/2017

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from the Meeting

Cofnodir y trafodion yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynnddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir trawsgrifiad o'r cyfieithu ar y pryd. Lle mae cyfranwyr wedi darparu cywiriadau i'w tystiolaeth, nodir y rheini yn y trawsgrifiad.

The proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, a transcription of the simultaneous interpretation is included. Where contributors have supplied corrections to their evidence, these are noted in the transcript.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Mohammad Asghar Bywgraffiad Biography	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Neil Hamilton Bywgraffiad Biography	UKIP Cymru UKIP Wales
Mike Hedges Bywgraffiad Biography	Llafur Labour
Neil McEvoy Bywgraffiad Biography	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Rhianon Passmore Bywgraffiad Biography	Llafur Labour
Nick Ramsay Bywgraffiad Biography	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Welsh Conservatives (Committee Chair)
Lee Waters Bywgraffiad Biography	Llafur Labour

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Steve Davies	Cyfarwyddwr Addysg, Llywodraeth Cymru Director of Education, Welsh Government
Owen Evans	Dirprwy Ysgrifennydd Parhaol, Grŵp Addysg a Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus, Llywodraeth Cymru Deputy Permanent Secretary, Education & Public Services Group, Welsh Government
Matthew Mortlock	Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru Wales Audit Office
Huw Vaughan Thomas	Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru Auditor General for Wales

**Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance**

Claire Griffiths	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Meriel Singleton	Ail Glerc Second Clerk
Katie Wyatt	Y Gwasanaeth Ymchwil Research Service

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 14:00.
The meeting began at 14:00.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau
Introductions, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

[1] **Nick Ramsay:** I welcome Members of the committee to this afternoon's meeting of public accounts. Headsets are available for translation and amplification. Please ensure electronic devices are on silent. In the event of an emergency, follow the ushers. No apologies have been received. Do Members have any declarations of interest that they wish to declare at this point of the meeting?

[2] **Mike Hedges:** I declare I'm chair of governors at two primary schools.

[3] **Nick Ramsay:** Any other declarations or interests? No.

**Papurau i'w Nodi
Papers to Note**

[4] **Nick Ramsay:** Item 2 is papers to note and minutes from the meeting held on 8 May. Are Members happy to agree those minutes? Yes. The minutes are accepted.

**Consortia Addysg Rhanbarthol: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth 3
Regional Education Consortia: Evidence Session 3**

[5] **Nick Ramsay:** Item 3 on today's agenda is regional education

consortia, and it's our third evidence session. Can I welcome our witnesses to the meeting? Thank you for being with us today. Would you like to state your name and position for our Record of Proceedings?

[6] **Mr Evans:** Owen Evans, deputy permanent secretary for education and public services.

[7] **Mr Davies:** Steve Davies, director of the education directorate.

[8] **Nick Ramsay:** Great, thank you. We've got a fair number of questions for you. I don't anticipate we'll get through them all. So, if at any point, I'm moving things on, it's to try and get through as much material as possible. I'll kick off with the first question, which is a very general one. Can I ask you what key lessons are there for wider regional working from the development of the education consortia, and what would the Welsh Government do differently if it was starting regional working through education now?

[9] **Mr Evans:** It's been an interesting process—I'll kick off with that. Perhaps if I explain what I'll cover, and then I'll explain what Steve will come into. I'm deputy permanent secretary, but I was director general for education and skills, almost at the time when the consortia were created. So, one of the things I'll try and get across is a bit of hindsight about what we were facing at the time, but also some of the lessons we've learnt since. I think one of the benefits we've had over the last few years—because this was such a novel approach in really establishing the first regional footprint for government services—is the approach that we've undertaken with the audit office around, in real time, trying to learn about the mistakes we were making at the time.

[10] Back in 2011–12, things were quite different. We still have our challenges in education now, but, back then, they were fairly mighty. We were 10 percentage points away from the English average on GCSEs level 2 inclusive; so something had to be done. And through a fairly bold ministerial decision back then, we decided to press on with it. The thought process at the time was that we had three pretty clear choices, I think. One was to leave it as it was—and remember we had a number of local authorities in special measures, with a number that were unsatisfactory. We had a choice to take what was the Scottish model effectively, which was to wrap school improvement in with the inspectorate, which is effectively what Education Scotland does. But the third was to build a consortia-level middle tier that would actually bring together and hopefully bring economies of scale. And

we did it against a backdrop, as you can imagine, where some of the local authorities were not particularly keen on the idea. But we went ahead with it. I think the lessons we've learnt were pretty clearly picked up in the auditor general's report, and we wouldn't argue with them. I think if we were to go back to then and try and do it again, we would probably try and be a little more clear about what the roles and responsibilities were for the consortia. However, at the time, it seemed as if a better option was just to get on with it. The second was it would have been better to have time to plan properly.

[11] **Nick Ramsay:** Mike Hedges.

[12] **Mike Hedges:** I'm surprised you said it was the first attempt at regional working. That means you exclude fire and rescue as a regional service, and you exclude the regional transport committees, such as SWITCH in south-west Wales.

[13] **Mr Evans:** Sorry, I absolutely accept that. I meant in the context of these big government services that we hadn't got on a regional basis beforehand.

[14] **Nick Ramsay:** You've mentioned whether you followed the Scottish model or not. Can you say a bit more about ensuring effective co-ordination between the local and the regional plans?

[15] **Mr Evans:** The clarity, the planning—the collaboration was a big one—but I think, at the time, the decision we took was around—. Given that the local authorities were having to come together and work together in quite a major fashion on this, if the Government would have pushed this too far, the local authorities would have been more and more unwilling participants in the programme. So, there was an element that, yes, we wanted to give local authorities their head to innovate, really, to address the issues that were there in their own regions, but also we needed to make sure that the school improvement services did happen. So, collaboration from the start might have been something we could've planned better into the system, and I accept that. The last was governance. I think governance, to a degree, was weak in some areas of Wales, and I think the whole process of coming together and creating these joint committees or the company limited by guarantee was a process that we had learnt quite significantly from over the past few years.

[16] The big thing that I can see from what we have achieved versus what

Scotland did is, I think, some of the innovation. One of the purposes of allowing the four regions to do things slightly differently was to react to local conditions, but the second was to get some innovation in the system. We have seen some of the consortia doing better at some things, and we've learnt from that. We've seen other areas where perhaps we won't try that again, and we've learnt from that. So, I think, if we'd have taken a specific national model and not allowed them any flexibility to adapt to it, we might have actually strangled some innovation in the process. Steve, I don't know if you want to—.

[17] **Mr Davies:** I think you've covered the five areas within the report. For me it was very much around local member engagement and the confidence that they would have in terms of influence and the confidence they'd have in terms of governance, that they had—. We influence over planning and decision making, but at the same they would be in a position where they could, as local democratically appointed members, hold the regional services to account. So, I think that was something that more time could've been spent on. In terms of the planning, the reality is that there were different emphases across each of the local authorities within regions. There was a common focus on raising standards within schools. That was common across regional planning and local planning.

[18] **Nick Ramsay:** Thanks. Lee Waters, did you—? Sorry, Neil McEvoy.

[19] **Neil McEvoy:** I wanted to pick up on what you just said, really. I'm conscious that I'm not at my questions yet. You said the Minister was bold. Which Minister are we talking about?

[20] **Mr Evans:** This would go back to Leighton Andrews's time.

[21] **Neil McEvoy:** Leighton Andrews. Okay. But you say there was effectively no time to plan properly, people weren't clear about roles and they weren't clear about responsibilities, and this was said in the last evidence session. Maybe I should declare an interest in being a former teacher, but I'm shocked that millions of pounds are spent and people are not clear about roles and not clear about responsibilities. It goes back to a year 7 assembly we used to do in school, where you got two boys, or two girls, with a snowball each, and they're going to roll it, and they've got to get to the fence. The person who takes his time, stands back, looks at the journey, decides how they're going to do it—they go a lot slower but they get to the fence quicker than the person who runs off and is running all over the

place with a snowball. What you guys are telling us here is that effectively you've been, or the education department in Wales, or the education departments—plural—in Wales and the consortia have just not been clear about roles and not been clear about responsibilities, and—. Where's the accountability? I'm just shocked, really. I'm really shocked, again, to listen to this.

[22] **Nick Ramsay:** Have you ever played snowball?

[23] **Mr Evans:** Fair point, but I think the question was: what could we improve on? We got some stuff right. The approach that we undertook right from the start, where we actually brought the people in with some world-class expertise—it was actually working with all the partners that we had at the time. In commissioning what would a good national model look like, that was a good approach, I think. The question was: what would I do differently? Well, I might've spent more time on that approach. We did look at roles, we did look at responsibilities, but when you're planning these national-scale programmes, you're never going to think of everything. I think if I was to promise we'll always think of everything in the future, I'd be lying. So, as we've gone through it, yes, we have learnt about bits that, yes, we could've spent a bit more time on there, and this is one of the points Steve was talking about on local democratic governance. There are bits we'd improve on, but I think, as an approach, it was quite bold. We did involve all of the partners in engaging about how this should work and what we could do collectively. So, to say that it was just a headlong rush towards getting something done, I think, would be unfair.

[24] **Neil McEvoy:** Okay. You say you got some stuff right. I'm glad about that, but I don't see how you can start a whole process of consortia where the roles are not clear, the responsibilities are not clear. This came up, as I said earlier, in the previous session. Where's the accountability, then? Has personnel changed?

[25] **Nick Ramsay:** Steve Davies.

[26] **Mr Davies:** Can I just quickly cover the first part? If I can quickly go through the chronology—

[27] **Nick Ramsay:** This issue of accountability is a major one, isn't it? We're not talking about a minor area, and it does seem to have been the area that fell down the most, in many ways.

[28] **Mr Davies:** Absolutely. I think we should get the chronology here, just to be clear. In 2012, the regional services were set up with a brief to look at different ways in which they could work, and there was no national model or anything central to it. The Government at the time—I wasn't working within the Government at that time—appointed Robert Hill early in 2013, so within four or five months, to review the education service across the whole of Wales. His recommendations in September pointed to a need for a national model. From September to April 2014, a number of professionals and international colleagues came together and worked on a national model. What we're saying is that that was published in 2014, and six months later, the Wales Audit Office and Estyn inspected the regions—these relatively new bodies—six months into a new model. There was a national model. There were requirements in terms of ways of working. It wasn't strong enough on accountability. It wasn't strong enough in terms of the requirements on regions to plan with their local authorities. But we're not talking about a vacuum, here, of a structure. It was a structure that needed to be built upon, and 12 months later, when Estyn and the Wales Audit Office came back, and Welsh Government had reviewed that national model, they recognised significant improvements. So, we're not starting off with a significant deficit model.

[29] **Nick Ramsay:** Great, okay. I want to bring some other Members in. Rhianon Passmore, and then Lee Waters.

[30] **Rhianon Passmore:** You've slightly gone into the context of this. I think it's difficult to encapsulate exactly what has occurred over the last number of years in terms of the establishment of the regional consortia. So how would you highlight the planks that have occurred in terms of being able to be in a position where we've got a national model and a literacy and numeracy framework, regional consortia—? Could you just outline for me a little bit, in terms of clarification, the shift in terms of what's occurred from the old system to the new?

[31] **Mr Davies:** Well, the first shift was the centralisation of services. So, people who were working in local authorities came into regional services, primarily, to start off with, dealing in what we called the major challenge role—challenge advisers. Originally there was banding, but we moved on from that quite rapidly to categorisation, from a system where schools were not either judged in terms of effectiveness, or supported well. We pooled our resources. I think sometimes we forget that they're the same people working

in services that were significantly underperforming, in at least seven, and adequate in 10. So, those services took them on, worked with those colleagues, with Welsh Government, and between 2012 and 2014, a number of initiatives were put in place. You've referenced literacy and numeracy. The categorisation process was put in place, and that was embedded by the regions. So, we had the first signs of a national approach being delivered at the regional level—with differences, because of that initial lack of clarity—and that infrastructure took us to 2014. There was a key measure then, which was the OECD. They came in, and they said, 'That's not good enough'. They doubted whether the regions would have the capacity in terms of going forward. We had the inspection of the review, and it pointed to a number of issues in terms of strengthening that work: governance, planning, and the balance of collaboration versus competition. Welsh Government used that, at that time, to review the national model. At the same time, the regions were responding to that. So, in 2015 into 2016, they knew they would be further reviewed in six months. It was a very tight process of evaluating and coming back. These are not offering long periods.

14:15

[32] During that time, there was an increased workload that came on to regions. It shifted beyond just the challenge. The regions were starting to take on part of the arm of Welsh Government in terms of implementation of policy for school improvement, strengthening literacy and numeracy, and we're also looking at the development of aspects of leadership, teaching and learning, and to the beginning of the implementation of the Donaldson review's findings into Successful Futures. So, we started with the recent school improvement services just focusing on challenge, with people who had been inherited from challenged authorities for being led differently. They've been challenged, they've responded to the criticisms, they've taken on new responsibilities, and they've shifted a culture within Welsh schools of one that—not just of regions—predominated on competition, but now is more strongly focused on collaboration. So, they're now at the situation where they're working more collaboratively, and they continue to respond to the individual recommendations as well as the collective recommendations of the Welsh Audit Office and Estyn.

[33] **Nick Ramsay:** Okay. Lee Waters.

[34] **Lee Waters:** Thank you, that's a very helpful chronology. Do you think now that the balance is right between the regional consortia and the local

education authorities?

[35] **Mr Evans:** In what respect, sorry—if I can just go back to the question a bit?

[36] **Lee Waters:** Mr Davies mentioned there was a balance to be struck between the two as part of the evolution of that chronology, and I was just wondering if you now think that that balance is the right one. It's been an evolving picture. Are we there, or is there some way to go?

[37] **Mr Davies:** Well, if you're talking about balance in terms of what was in the national model to deliver—the core school improvement services—I think there's still scope for improvement. There is still some difference in the regions, which is about consistency, but I think we're very close to that balance in terms of an acceptance of where responsibilities lie, both from a local authority perspective and a regional perspective.

[38] **Lee Waters:** Where do they lie—with the local authorities or with the consortia?

[39] **Mr Davies:** The statutory accountability lies with the local authority. Therefore, they are required, and in our best practice, do it very well. They challenge the regions on the extent to which they're delivering their business plans, which they've agreed with them, against delivery of outputs in terms of examination performance and test performance. So, the regions know that the local authorities are accountable—therefore the statutory responsibility, therefore they recognise they need to be held to account. They need to go to meetings with directors of education, and they need to go to meetings across all five councils, sometimes there are six councils in a region. So, the regions recognise it, but the local authorities recognise that the regions need to have the scope to get on and deliver the job, so they're not chasing them on a regular basis for lots of small amounts of information in terms of progress. Some of that did happen in the early days, but that relationship's matured.

[40] **Lee Waters:** It does seem to be a rather cluttered landscape and responsibilities quite defuse. You mentioned, for example, that there were seven local authorities underperforming, and 10 adequate. You also said that the same challenge advisors who were working for them are now working for the regions, and you've said that people are inherited from the challenged authorities, but they're now being led differently. But the ability to which the regions can lead those challenge advisors when they're working to the local

authorities is quite complex, isn't it? Because a director of a regional consortium, for example, doesn't line-manage the challenge advisors—they can't instruct them. So, if you've got the director of education with one set of priorities, and the head of a consortium with a different set, there's a tension there that is not particularly helpful, it seems to me.

[41] **Mr Davies:** Well, in the great majority of the regions, the managing director employs all of those staff, and I think in ERW the challenge advisors, the majority of those challenge advisors, still work for the authority—not all of them.

[42] **Lee Waters:** That's right.

[43] **Mr Davies:** And we're currently looking in to that, and having those discussions with ERW, because it does bring challenge. But in terms of Estyn's view of the quality of the challenge advisor work, and the extent to which the managing director and her senior team were able to influence the quality of challenge advisors, it commented on it extremely positively. So, changing that for the sake of it, when it's working very effectively, is a bit of a challenge.

[44] One thing to add to the earlier statement about—. I've said that those staff transferred—a significant proportion of those staff who transferred from local authorities to regions didn't last that long. They were replaced, and because of the economies of scale, their numbers were reduced. So, for example, in EAS, where I was managing director at the time, I inherited 130 staff. In three years, it was down to 100 staff—just over 100. The money that I released from there I invested in school work to allow that resource to be used more effectively. Some of it—I seconded good headteachers in to fulfil that challenge adviser role, so I wouldn't want to give you the picture that those were the only staff that the regions used—

[45] **Lee Waters:** But as you've said, that's not the consistent picture across Wales, is it?

[46] **Mr Davies:** Yes, for most of Wales and most of the services. In some of them, all staff are employed—so, for example, in, I think it's EAS, Central South, all of the challenge advisers in GwE, and some of the challenge advisers in ERW are employed by the region, some by the local authority, but they're currently reviewing that practice now.

[47] **Nick Ramsay:** Owen Evans, do you want to come in on that point?

[48] **Mr Evans:** Yes, if I could. I think it's a very live point. The bit I would come back to—is it working or not? We've grappled with—and the OECD were quite straight about this, they thought it was cluttered. We grapple with the fact—and I think some of the other people who have been given evidence to you have highlighted this, as well—it's quite a complex thing to cut through. You have got local authorities, they have got the statutory responsibility, but the school improvement service is delivered by someone else, although they have direct governance around that.

[49] With local authorities, of course, it's far more complex—school improvement is not just about the consortia, it's about a number of other services that local authorities will provide and, indeed, health boards will provide. So, actually taking that statutory responsibility away from the local authorities is a very big step. The question then is: would you continue to get the type of support you need from other support services? So, it hasn't been an easy decision. I probably would say, 'Yes, it probably is a little cluttered.' But it comes back to: does it work and can we show that the school improvement system is working?

[50] We're currently, of course, consulting on it as part of the local government White Paper consultations. We've had about 160 responses in, and we're currently going through exactly what some of the points people who have commented on this are making.

[51] **Lee Waters:** It is hard to reach that judgment on whether it's working or not, though, isn't it, because the auditor general said in his memorandum that not enough has been done to tackle the variability? And as the results aren't being measured on the consortia basis—too complex, it seems—it's hard to reach a definitive judgment on that.

[52] **Mr Evans:** I'm not sure that's completely fair. Yes, we do measure the results on a local authority basis. We track the records now down to school basis, but we do aggregate up to regional consortia level. The review and challenge events we have will go through those results, but, at the end of the day, all of the consortia have to sign off their business plans, which they will have been through with the local authorities, and we're then looking at what actions they've promised they were doing and have they done them. There will always be bits where we will see we could do better, sometimes on an individual basis, but sometimes on a national basis as well.

[53] **Lee Waters:** Just my final point—so, back to my initial question about whether the balance of power between the consortia and the LEAs is right. In a situation where you have a group of local authority education directors who, as you say—17 of them were either adequate or underperforming, not that long ago, so where you have a drive for change from the consortia, it's not surprising to find there's going to be some resistance and cultural hangovers there. Do you think there's enough drive in the system and the structures are currently right to be able to make sure that the sunlight shines through?

[54] **Mr Evans:** I'll come back to the point of whether we think it's working or not. Based on the results—at level 2 inclusive, for example, but we're looking at increasingly more sophisticated results—things have improved. The question about whether that balance is right—I'm not sure the balance will ever be quite right, but it's a lot better than it was five years ago, I would say, for exactly the points you've made.

[55] **Mr Davies:** The most recent test we have of that is the OECD visit. They met with the managing directors—for every region, there is a lead director of education, so one of the five or six lead the work of the other directors as well. So, they met them and challenged them on the point you're making in terms of the drive against the national reform agenda and whether they are really up for it. I think the biggest test for them—those who were bit more resistant—was phase 2, for me, taking on the additional responsibility for implementing significant reform around the new curriculum. So, the regions are managing, with additional resource, a lot of the pioneer school work. So, they've taken on additional responsibilities that are supported by the lead directors—

[56] **Lee Waters:** But there is some resistance from LEAs, is there?

[57] **Mr Davies:** Well, you have 22 local education authorities. They're not totally consistent, I believe, in the fact that they wanted, in the first place, all of their school improvement resources to go to the centre. Naturally, they've run school improvement services, so they would want to have a say and an involvement in terms of that practice. There is their democratic process that they have to reach agreement, but the person who drives that relationship is the lead director. So, I would not expect 100 per cent support all round for it—

[58] **Nick Ramsay:** Okay, I need to move things on. Rhianon Passmore, did you have a very brief question? I'll bring you in and then we need to move on.

[59] **Rhianon Passmore:** Very briefly, then, in terms of—we're talking about democratic accountability. You've, sort of, answered this in terms of the emerging picture, moving forward. The issue around whether or not local authorities should have that statutory educational responsibility or whether it should be purely placed with schools—would you outline how it is in some scrutiny committees, whereby the governance structures are assessing the progress within that region, within the consortia, from elected members? Is it a cosy scenario or is it one that can be more stringent? How would you outline the process?

[60] **Mr Evans:** I think it's developed quite considerably over the past five years. I think the process now, where even those who are providing democratic governance—we're providing courses and we're providing instruction on how to be more challenging. I think, having been to some of the latest review and challenge—Steve, you go to them all, so you might want to say something—they are a damn sight more challenging, and more constructive, actually, than they were a while ago. So, I think, on balance, we could always improve, but there is plenty of challenge in the system now.

[61] Sorry, the one point I was just going to make, to go back to Lee's, was that one of the questions, when we were talking about resistance against change—one of the feelings when this kicked off, of course, was the best authorities thought to themselves, 'Hang on, I'm going to give up control of the school improvement to something that is unfounded, untested and, quite frankly, I'd rather carry on as I am.' One of the things we've monitored very closely is how those authorities that were the best performing then have performed since, and how have those who needed the support most performed since then. The best authorities have continued to show very, very strong results and the poorest authorities have shown significant gains.

[62] **Nick Ramsay:** Great. Neil Hamilton.

[63] **Neil Hamilton:** Looking ahead now, the local government White Paper invited responses in relation to whether the local authorities' additional learning needs functions could be transferred to the regional level. The consortia themselves seem to be rather diffident about this, and said, 'Well, this might be difficult. It needs to be carefully considered. You need to have

an input from the health service, from other services and so on.’ Perhaps you could outline for us what your own thinking is on this as to why additional learning needs functions might be better dealt with, at least in some cases, at a regional level, rather than at a local authority level.

[64] **Mr Evans:** I’ll come on to Steve in a second, because you’ll be closer to this than me, but this comes back to the points of clarity and how cluttered the environment is. Local authorities do provide a number of specialist services that support ALN, the same as the health boards do. The big question that we’re grappling with, and we’ve had comments in through the local government consultation, is around: is the system fit for purpose? Is it actually going to be improved if we were to move responsibility for it from the local authorities? And the last question, which I’m sure you will have considered as well, is: do we believe that if we were to make the decision to move ALN into the consortia, they’ve got the capacity to make a good fist of it? So, those are very live at the moment. I haven’t got an answer for you, I’m afraid, but we will have to make a decision as part of the publication of the White Paper.

[65] **Neil Hamilton:** But clearly you think there is scope for this, and there is advantage, potentially, from it.

[66] **Mr Evans:** There are some advantages and some disadvantages. Perhaps, Steve, if you want to—

[67] **Mr Davies:** Yes, your question asked not whether all of the service or part of it—so I think I can come back on that part. For me, there are three fundamental elements of the ALN work. The first is the role of the local authority in terms of being an advocate for the child and for the parents, and that’s impossible to shift.

14:30

[68] So, to take away that responsibility, particularly in terms of that statutory responsibility, because they’re legally responsible as well, that’s very—well, it’s not impossible, but it’s very difficult to shift. I think that is something that would not easily sit with regions.

[69] There are two other parts. The second part is the management of the additional services that the local authorities provide to schools and those individual children—so, educational psychologists, and they relate to hearing,

to sight, and other areas where the barriers to learning are there. The delivery of those services, at least in one region—in Gwent—is already pooled across five authorities. It's co-ordinated across the region, so there is the capacity to pull that in. As those services relate to health, as was mentioned earlier, there is the potential—. So, if you are going to consider an area, that would be an area where there is potential to look at if there are the synergies—not in all local authorities, but in most regions—with the health boards, which may offer a more strategic approach to co-ordination of services. The regions have demonstrated they've taken on strategic responsibilities and delivered those successfully, so there is an indication that that should be considered.

[70] The third area is really the transformation of the workforce, and that is for the local authority-employed staff who work in this area, which I've touched on—educational psychologists and other support services—but, just as importantly, and perhaps more importantly, the headteachers and teachers who are delivering on the ground. What we're looking at there, particularly for the new ALN Bill, is that genuine transformation of that service. The professional learning and growth that's needed, and the approach to that, has parallels with what we are currently doing on professional learning in schools in readying the staff to deliver the new curriculum. So, it's working with the clientele that regions are working with on a day-to-day basis, in terms of delivering change. So, it's probably worth looking at that third area.

[71] Owen's position is that we'd still have reservations with the challenge of the change that's required and the turmoil that will be kicking in during that time. Clearly, we want to wait and respond to the consultation that has just gone out, in terms of other people's views in terms of ALN, but, fundamentally, there are three areas, and two of those areas lend themselves to at least be considered.

[72] **Neil Hamilton:** When we took evidence from the consortia, the general view was that the national model provides a clear purpose, but they were concerned—. You mentioned Gwent, of course, which is a relatively compact and homogenous area—not all regions of Wales are like that, and there was a doubt as to whether the national model contains within it sufficient flexibility to take proper account of the complications of geography, rurality, language issues, which, clearly, are not really an issue in south-east Wales, but might be elsewhere. Is that something that you accept, and do you think that may be an objection to the transfer of functions to a regional level, or at least an

inhibition upon it?

[73] **Mr Davies:** I think there is flexibility. I think we've got to decide where you are going to provide flexibility. I think flexibility in scope is difficult. It's back to a common, consistent approach—'This is the job, this has to be done, so, if you're going to transfer services, these are the services that are going to transfer'. I think it's probably worth thinking about flexibility in two or three areas. Geography is one: so, do you cluster services in large authorities? Some work in hubs, but it needs to be clear that that hub is still taking on the scope of it.

[74] You can also, and it may avoid the big bang that we had with regional working last time—you might want to, if you work on the transfer of powers, actually phase that, with two regions starting off and two regions following so you have some of that learning. So, I think, in terms of flexibility, geographic flexibility, it does provide a challenge, and we can look at ways—. We gave that flexibility in our first review of the national model, which was recognised and commented on positively by the Wales Audit Office because we'd placed that flexibility. But there's a balance to be struck between flexibility and how that may be used to restrict consistency, and, sometimes, potentially, trying to hold on to old ways of working.

[75] **Nick Ramsay:** Thanks, Neil. Rhianon Passmore.

[76] **Rhianon Passmore:** Thank you. Bearing in mind the birth and emergence of consortia and the cultural shift that that has enabled across Wales in terms of self-improvement, would you agree with a view that there needs to be, as Donaldson is embedded, moving forward, a period of stability within education across Wales?

[77] **Mr Evans:** I'll say a couple of words and then I'll perhaps ask Steve to come in. I think we know that one of the big criticisms of the OECD, when they came in in 2013, was that there wasn't really a strategy. There had been a lot of chopping and changing in educational policy. One of the things I think we have achieved over the past four or five years is we have a plan. We have published 'Qualified for Life', which, for the first time, really, set out, across the whole of the education landscape, what our view was for the future. Some of those elements were fairly blank, because we said, 'We will have to do something there'. But they have been, over time, filled in. So, Donaldson and 'Successful Futures' was a major plank of that.

[78] I think, over the past few years, yes, we have seen reform probably on a level that we've never seen in education. We've got to be honest about that. But one of the things we've learnt and one of the things we're quite careful about now is not chopping and changing, and sticking with the approach we have. One of the reasons why we took what is a relatively bold approach in asking the OECD back to have a look at what we were doing was, really, 'Look, you came in here, you were quite critical. We've embarked on this reform agenda. Do you think we're on the right lines?' And it was heartening to see that largely we were on the right lines. So, yes, I do agree sometimes we can chop and change too much. We will be publishing 'Qualified for Life' 2 in the coming months. The point is, it is 'Qualified for Life' 2; it is just an adaptation of 'Qualified for Life' 1. It is not throwing everything up in the air again. We've listened to the sector, actually, and teachers and headteachers have said we need to let this stuff embed now, which is why we're being very careful about how we're rolling stuff out.

[79] **Nick Ramsay:** I think Lee Waters has a brief supplementary, a very brief supplementary, on this—very brief.

[80] **Lee Waters:** Yes. Just to follow up on that, you mention the importance of seeing through a strategy you'd set out and obviously Donaldson is a key part of that. I'm just wanting your reflections on the results from Scotland where Donaldson is ahead of us a little bit and where there has been a fall-back in some key standards, and whether or not that's been measured as it goes and we're learning from that as we're implementing our version.

[81] **Mr Evans:** We are. We've had two separate visits up to Scotland—both officials, but also colleagues from Qualifications Wales have been up as well. We're learning a lot and we have, all the way through, always said that the Scottish model is attractive. However, they have made mistakes. They've done a lot of stuff right, but there are things that we can learn from. So, we've been reflecting quite strongly about what's happening up there. What has been quite interesting in what's happened in Scotland, actually, is they're looking at what's happening with consortia with some interest themselves. Because one of the issues I think they may have had is the fact that they didn't have a strong enough middle tier. So, Steve, you probably know more about it than I do.

[82] **Mr Davies:** I think it's learning from Scotland, but actually we went about it in the beginning in a different way to Scotland. There are four or five quick things, which I'll run through. First of all, Scotland introduced a new

curriculum but didn't start to think about how they were going to assess progress in it at the outset—they were two years down. So, throughout this programme, our pioneer schools are looking at, 'What are we going to teach?' and 'How are we going to assess it?' at the same time. That's the first thing. The second thing is that we've used an expert panel, international panel, from the outset. Scotland introduced one halfway through 2016. So, having that, people who've been through curriculum change before can look at those checks and balances, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy. If you remember, we had a literacy and numeracy framework going back to 2013 and that is being embedded within the programme. So, that rigour around those core cross-curricular areas, supplemented by digital competency, is there.

[83] The regional school improvement service, which Owen referred to—yes, Scotland are talking to us about it. We're working through four teams now. Managing directors have someone underneath them. There are four people—one person in each region—who work with us on the strategic implementation of that. Just thinking back to 20-odd authorities doing that—Scotland are dealing with 30-odd authorities, I believe, in trying to deliver that. The last thing is that we've looked to take our strategic partners with us. So, Estyn work alongside us—not in any degree of comfort, but to challenge us. They sit alongside the pioneer schools and the regions to challenge the proposals that are coming forward in terms of the curriculum. Qualifications Wales are looking now to the new GCSEs and saying, 'Don't wait until we've got the curriculum and then think about—'. And schools are looking at that and saying, 'Well, you are looking ahead and looking strategically', and regions have been central to the delivery of that.

[84] **Nick Ramsay:** Owen Evans and then back to Rhianon.

[85] **Mr Evans:** And just the last point on that is how important it's been—. Back to Steve's first point about the assessment, I think Scotland, if they were to do it again, would have looked at their high-stakes tests a lot earlier in the process, because I think the feeling was that they had moved along this very different approach to curriculum development, but they hadn't spent enough time really looking at how their nationals and highers worked in the context of that. We work very closely with Qualifications Wales, who are an integral part of us developing the new curriculum, because we cannot have a situation where we develop children on a different basis up to age 14 and then put the brakes on and ask them do old-style examinations. So, this is something we have to develop in tandem over the next few years, and

something we've learnt.

[86] **Nick Ramsay:** Okay, back to Rhianon Passmore.

[87] **Rhianon Passmore:** Thank you. Bearing in mind you've mentioned some of the areas of development and the pictures of how we will challenge current practice at the moment, how would you articulate the overall impact of regional consortia to date, both from a delivery point of view and a Welsh Government point of view?

[88] **Mr Evans:** I'll cover the biggest change, I think—the biggest two changes—I've seen, and then perhaps I'll go on to Steve, who can talk in a little more detail. The two biggest changes I've seen are (1) the emergence of, first of all, a regional strategic layer, and latterly a national strategic layer, as they're coming together increasingly to talk about the national priorities. The other big one, and I see this everyday day now, is that—it's a point Steve made earlier on—five years ago, our schools were very, very competitive. If you set them an exam question, the first thing they would do is like that. We're seeing a huge shift now. There was an element of that. What we're seeing now is that schools are now very, very good and very engaged in school-to-school improvement.

[89] **Rhianon Passmore:** How do you articulate that to the lay person? I mean, in terms of peer to peer and school to school and cluster working, how would you articulate what that means?

[90] **Mr Evans:** I think, in the past, what traditionally would have happened is that a teacher would have benefitted from someone coming in to tell them what was best practice. I think what they're benefitting from now is teachers are actually getting together to share the best practice from across our schools. The OECD came in and they actually recognised there was some practice in our schools that was world leading. The benefit now is that we can go to those schools where there's world-leading practice and share it amongst other teachers, and I think that's been a major step forward.

[91] **Nick Ramsay:** That wasn't being picked up on or being done before.

[92] **Mr Evans:** They would have, but I don't think on the basis that—these schools now have been given, effectively, permission to talk amongst themselves, and actually improve practice on that basis. And I don't think that was happening by any extent to the same extent that it's happening

now. That's been a major shift, I think.

[93] **Nick Ramsay:** A basic innovation, but one that would obviously have paid dividends.

[94] **Mr Evans:** It has, and there are challenges in that. In fairness to teachers, if you are taking a teacher out of a classroom, asking them to spend time with another school, that creates an issue for that teacher, it creates an issue for the school that they are being pulled out of, and it also creates an issue for the school you are sending that teacher into, who are having to take another teacher in. So we've had to learn as we've gone, and we've had to build in quite a lot of preparatory work, and also funding, in some regards, about how we make sure that capacity doesn't mean that we're advertising too much on the improvement, but not actually getting the bread and butter of teaching in the class.

[95] **Rhianon Passmore:** I'm going to come to—*[Inaudible.]*—and that type of working.

[96] **Mr Davies:** If I could come back just quickly on that, I think people weren't doing it systematically in any way when I came to Wales in 2012. Local authorities were delivering courses on literacy and numeracy themselves, quite often with a person who had two other jobs that they were doing because of the size of the authority. Therefore, the degree of specialism in that person was not strong. And the culture was: 'I know the best; come into the training centre in Monmouthshire'—to take an example—'and we'll tell you how to do it', put bluntly. Not only were they not the best to do that, it was just like coming in for an injection of literacy and numeracy: you expect them to go back and embed it within their own practice. The reality is that, with school-to-school work or a self-improving school system, teachers are more enthused and will learn more effectively by working with their peers. That said, one of our biggest challenges in the self-improving school system is the internal variation. So, it isn't just about teachers going to other people's schools, it's actually within their own school, going to other subject areas, other aspects of work. So, it has been a significant shift.

14:45

[97] **Nick Ramsay:** Mike Hedges, then Neil.

[98] **Mike Hedges:** Sorry, what you've said I don't recognise. I live in Swansea and I've chaired the governing body of two schools for the best part of 30 years. I remember advisers and advisory teachers who used to lead. I'm also aware that one of the schools I've been involved with, for at least the last 20 years and possibly the last 25 years, has been involved in letting people come along and see examples of good practice. I'm also well aware of the substantial amount of cluster work that has been done right the way across Swansea. I've not noticed any great jump in that. It was something that was happening over, certainly, the last 25 years.

[99] **Mr Davies:** I can't comment specifically on Swansea. All I can say is that I also recognise patches of collective work where groups of teachers got together, but the degree to which the authority were able to facilitate that and enable that to happen systematically, not just within the Swansea area or within that area, but extending it across to Neath Port Talbot, to Pembrokeshire, to Carmarthen, where they can share that wider practice. But I respect what you said in terms of your own school. On a larger scale, I've seen it happen significantly.

[100] **Mike Hedges:** Can you produce numbers? You've made a lot of statements about these things. Can you produce numbers of the increase in that?

[101] **Mr Davies:** We'll go back, I'll go back to look at data I can collect for you on the numbers of schools who are working in that way.

[102] **Mike Hedges:** You've talked about a huge increase. Are you able to show numbers for what they were 10 years ago, compared to what they were five years ago, to what they are now?

[103] **Mr Davies:** I can't do that for you because I was not collecting the data 10 years ago and the data would not have been collected in that way 10 years ago, because I've not seen that in any of the aspirations for the councils who would have been working at that time. So, I can't get you a baseline, but I'll look to get data from the regions, where I can, to give you an indication of the extent to which school working is happening.

[104] **Nick Ramsay:** Neil McEvoy.

[105] **Neil McEvoy:** Just a few things. First of all, 25 per cent of those who responded to the committee's survey—only 25 per cent—agreed or strongly

agreed that the support the consortia provide helps their school improve. So, 25 per cent of professionals think that the consortia help schools improve. I just wondered what you made of that.

[106] **Mr Evans:** The first thing to say is we do take every survey seriously. This is one survey we've looked at; we've looked at a plethora of others as well and we try and learn from them. But there are a lot of surveys out there that are saying slightly different things. That one, we did have a look at and we did have a think about and, Steve, perhaps if you've got a couple of comments about what we thought might be going on there, but we can't give you a definitive answer.

[107] **Mr Davies:** The first thing to say is that many of the schools we categorise as green—which are primaries above 25 per cent, secondaries just below—the regions deliberately don't spend a great deal of time in those schools because they're highly effective. What they do is work with those schools, persuade and fund some of those schools to do development work with other schools. So, those schools would not see the region turning up—whereas some of the local authorities did previously—to do the training in a school. They'd come in and work directly with them. I think that's the most significant issue in terms of that figure. We've got to continually work at, not educating, but working with the people within the region to publicise the way in which that works. But that shouldn't be a distraction. We can spend a lot of time persuading people that the regions are doing very well and promoting them against that. I would see it primarily down to the fact that they do play an enabling role. With some schools, they deliberately do not spend time in there; they don't want to interfere.

[108] **Neil McEvoy:** I think it's clearly lack of communication, a lack of understanding perhaps, or maybe they don't think the consortia actually perform very well. Just talking more generally, if I may, Chair. Why do we perform so badly in reading, maths and science in Wales in comparison to the rest of the world, but also in comparison to the rest of the UK?

[109] **Mr Davies:** In the Programme for International Student Assessment?

[110] **Neil McEvoy:** Yes.

[111] **Mr Davies:** Right. Well, the analysis this year is pretty clear. The reason we have not performed as well as those in other countries is fundamentally the extent to which our, say, top 20 per cent, our most able students, excel.

If you look at the OECD data, for each country it fits you into six or seven grades, from the lowest performing to the highest performing, and it puts the percentage of your country in each of those grades. Six to nine years ago, we did badly with the low-ability pupils, as well as the high-ability pupils. We've closed that gap in terms of low-ability pupils, but we are significantly underperforming with our, I would say, top 20 per cent of pupils.

[112] That's a consequence of the performance measures that we've had in Wales. It's quite simple, I guess, politically, in terms of competing with England we had a level 2 plus. Level 2 plus means just get past a C. Okay? For some people, schools are bagging it, then let them do something else and don't extend them and push them. We've looked at extending beyond level 2 plus to looking at a capped point score. So, every child's grade will have a point, which will extend the accountability and impact on behaviours. So, we're working on that.

[113] I had a conference with almost every secondary headteacher in the country. There's only 205 of them, it's not a massive country, so we can pull them together. But, the challenge then, in terms of that top 20 per cent—

[114] **Neil McEvoy:** I think it's pretty clear, though, you know, we're not doing very well. Do you think there needs to be fundamental change in the system? For example, if you look at Estyn, the way schools are inspected and—. When I was a teacher, I frankly thought that Estyn was a waste of time really. You know, you jump through hoops for a week, do paperwork, and I think many teachers would say the same thing. What we need, I think, is a fundamental change. Do we look at countries like Finland where they perform very well? Do we learn lessons from what they do there?

[115] **Mr Evans:** Steve and I were in Finland in February. So, yes, we do. I'll come on to your point. The question is: structurally, is there something wrong? I think, looking back four or five years, I'd say there was. Two of the biggest areas—I'll come on to Estyn. Two of the biggest areas—. We've had, and we continue to have, a very traditional curriculum, which effectively teaches rote learning for exams, to an extent. This is one of the things, in fairness, Scotland have tried to move away from. So, that's the first thing—that we have tried to play the game, so to speak.

[116] The second is that the qualifications we have have, again, very much tested those types of skills that are rote learning—can you turn up on the day

and regurgitate what you've learnt—which is why, over the past few years, we've been moving and we have launched new GCSEs now that are very much testing the types of cognitive abilities that PISA tests for, and that also employers are telling us are the skills they actually need. So, I think you're absolutely right, actually, that there were some structural things that meant, if we didn't address them, we would continue to do quite badly in PISA. We are changing them. It was good to see an increase in maths, but we've got a huge amount to do and these things do take time to work through.

[117] Estyn—no, I don't think they're rubbish, but they are adapting. They're having to adapt to what is a changing picture. They are having to adapt to a different model of how local government and regional consortia work. They are having to adapt to a different mode of school improvement. I think they have adapted to certain facets very well over the past few years, but this is a journey and they will continue to have to adapt, the same as we will. Steve, I don't know if you want to come in.

[118] **Mr Davies:** No, I agree.

[119] **Nick Ramsay:** Can I just come in there? Because you just said that there are issues at the moment, not with the lower quartile, but with the top 20 per cent and they're not where they should be. But didn't you say earlier that the consortia aren't working with the top tier, so—

[120] **Mr Evans:** No, no, no—sorry.

[121] **Nick Ramsay:** Did I misunderstand?

[122] **Mr Evans:** Steve's point—and I'll come to you in a bit. What Steve was saying was that it's the best schools, not the best pupils, that the consortia are fairly light in their activities with.

[123] **Nick Ramsay:** With the best schools, okay.

[124] **Mr Evans:** The point that Steve was making, I think, is that we've got to reflect on it. Three or four years ago—six years ago, definitely—we had a long tail. We had a big chunk of schools that were not where we needed them to be. We have moved on considerably in the specific focus on individual schools and the support they get, which is why the tail has improved, but we still do have that challenge in making sure that our brightest get the stretch they need. The Seren programme has gone some way for that, but one of the

challenges we're looking at, at the moment, is what more—

[125] **Nick Ramsay:** But there's still—. I'll bring you in next, Steve Davies. There would still be a chunk of those top 20 per cent of pupils in those schools, wouldn't there?

[126] **Mr Evans:** Yes, there would. I take that.

[127] **Mr Davies:** The challenge element of a region's work: if you are a red or an amber school, you will have somebody from the region in your school for eight, 10, 12, 16 days during the course of the year from the challenge. What the regions are doing now with the challenge element, with the mature schools being the successful schools, is they're getting other schools to work in triads to support the self-evaluation and review. Where the green schools will be used is, while across the country there is our 20 per cent, there are schools who are doing very well with the top 20 per cent, some of them across all three subjects—science, English, maths—and some of them doing exceptionally well in maths, but underperforming with English and science, and the job of the region—. Whereas historically, Welsh Government would appoint 10, 12 disciples to go out to all schools to give them the same training, 'Let's get the top 20 per cent', it's far more intelligent and intuitive for the regions to say, 'Where is our best practice?', and those green schools will be used because they are performing at that higher level, and they share what it is they do to extend those top 20 per cent, and how that is reflected in their exam performance as well.

[128] **Nick Ramsay:** Mike Hedges, did you have a—?

[129] **Mike Hedges:** Two quick questions on what we've just heard. Haven't some of the improvements—certainly, I can talk of Pentrehafod and Morryston schools in Swansea—been done by Schools Challenge Cymru, which has helped improve their performance by 15 to 20 per cent? If every school had improved by 15 to 20 per cent, we'd be talking outstanding results in Wales. So, are the consortia claiming credit for things that Schools Challenge Cymru has achieved?

[130] **Mr Davies:** On the performance of Schools Challenge Cymru, there were schools that did exceptionally well and there were others who did not benefit significantly from that programme. So, you can't say that everything that was invested resulted in that. Even where Schools Challenge Cymru money was spent, they were working closely with the local authority, but you

can't hide from the fact that we've invested a large amount of money in that and it did bear dividends. But in the same way we can't attribute, as Estyn were saying, all of the improvement to the regions, I'd accept that Schools Challenge Cymru has made a contribution.

[131] **Nick Ramsay:** Owen Evans, did you want to comment on that?

[132] **Mr Evans:** Yes, just a point on that and a point on the previous point. On Schools Challenge Cymru, the whole point of that was to, as you know, look at the 40 schools with the biggest challenges across Wales, and actually to make sure they got the support they needed. It was always meant to be a time-limited programme to get those back to where they should be, and many of the schools—. It was one of the proudest things I've seen; as you know, you drive past Barry comp in Barry, and they have a huge placard on their fence saying the best results they've ever had. For some schools, they didn't move ahead enough, but overall I think the programme did give that injection that schools needed in some areas. The consortia I don't think would ever claim credit for what was achieved there, but what they're trying to do now is trying to ascertain exactly what elements of Schools Challenge Cymru really made the difference, and how we're going to mainstream it through the consortia.

[133] **Mike Hedges:** We need to remember that the schools challenge came from London, don't we, and you were getting inland London boroughs performing better than some of the leafy suburbs of the south-east of England? The other question is: why can you not read across from Estyn and the traffic lights? Why is it you get a school that is green on the consortium report, but isn't an 'excellent' for Estyn? Why do they not read across? I would have thought that if they're both testing effectively the same school's performance, why don't they equate?

[134] **Mr Davies:** There are exceptions. On the whole, you could look at a strong correlation between where judgments were made on schools. Where the region wrote up the performance of that school, which it has to, for the local authority for inspection, you'd see a considerable relationship between those two. We accept that we need to continue to work on that. Estyn are very clear; they are using different methods and mechanisms. They're in that school for a protracted period of time, so they get access to more of that information. The OECD have been very clear to us around our framework for assessment and evaluation for children and young people and for schools. In those recommendations they've said, 'You've got to strengthen them

further.’ We’re engaged with that at the moment. We’re refining the categorisation, and Estyn are working alongside us looking at that, so we are not working in isolation. We will continue to refine that, and I would look to reduce further the lack of correlation where it happens. The regions are judged on it when they’re inspected by Estyn, and each region will know where that correlation has not taken place. I’d expect them to respond on an individual basis to each of those schools.

15:00

[135] **Nick Ramsay:** Okay, we’re heading into the last 15 minutes or so. Rhianon Passmore, did you have any further questions?

[136] **Rhianon Passmore:** Very briefly, then, in terms of the residue of Schools Challenge Cymru, how are you encapsulating that into the ordinary work and the core working of the consortia? Also, in regard to—if I can take them in a couple, if that’s all right—we know what ‘good’ looks like in terms of green schools in English and Welsh; what does ‘good’ look like in terms of Welsh Government, and in terms of delivery of the regional consortia mandate? Secondarily, how are you spreading effective evaluation on a consistent basis across consortia? I know there are three—it’s a mixed-bag question there.

[137] **Mr Davies:** Schools Challenge Cymru and what we’re embedding in terms of the practice—well, first of all, each region is being challenged by schools, because they give an account to us of how they’re embedding the practice in each of the schools. There are action plans for each of the schools in terms of embedding practice. In the great majority of cases, the schools have not only embraced the plan, but are actually employing some of the people who are working in that school with Schools Challenge Cymru, and I think that’s happened in the majority of the schools, so you get that continuity. Other examples of activity practice, which is not just carrying on embedding it within the Schools Challenge Cymru schools, but transferring it to other schools who, since Schools Challenge Cymru has come along, have faced particular challenges: so, an example would be that there are regular board meetings, AIBs—accelerated improvement boards—which bring together systematically, over a period of time when they’re looking at improvement, external partners, internal partners, chairs of governors and headteachers, which seems to have had a benefit. So, we’re looking at: what are the systems that schools Challenge Cymru use? What are the professional staff that Schools Challenge Cymru used and what was the impact of those,

so they can embed it? So, each of the regions are working with the Schools Challenge Cymru schools, but they're also taking on other schools that have since fallen into red or deeper amber and are applying some of that learning to those schools as well. That was the first part.

[138] **Mr Evans:** The one thing I reflect on Schools Challenge Cymru that I think we've changed is that four or five years ago we were very strong on the challenge, but not so strong on the support. I remember the first meetings with—. It's changed the Government's approach; our approach. I remember the first time we sat down with headteachers to discuss how we were going to do Schools Challenge Cymru, and we had our ideas, and the headteachers effectively said, 'No, that's not going to work', which was quite salutary, but we listened and we re-did what the plan was around it. I remember the first meeting when we got all of the Schools Challenge Cymru schools together—I'm going to regret saying this, I'm almost certain—but one of the people turned up and said, 'You know who we are, don't you? We're the naughty 40'. I went back and sat at the back of not the next meeting but the meeting after, and what you saw was a room that was energised around reform. That wasn't the case at the start. The OECD did pick up on this when they talked about the system moving from what they called reform fatigue, which was your point earlier on, to being reform ready. So, I think one of the big things we've done is shift from just challenge to challenge with proper support as well. I think that was one of the big things we learnt.

[139] **Rhianon Passmore:** Okay. So, in terms of regional delivery, and in terms of what 'good' looks like for consortia, is Welsh Government confident that we have got that framework, that mandate there so that consortia are absolutely clear about what good performance on a consortium level looks like?

[140] **Mr Davies:** In my view, yes, and after having twice had the benefit of Wales Audit Office and Estyn coming and giving them a very clear view of what 'good' looks like, they have been working collaboratively. We've facilitated some of that. After the last Wales Audit Office inspection with Estyn, I invited the Wales Audit Office with Estyn to spend two days with the managing directors and the lead directors for the regions, first to exemplify what 'good' looks like, but secondly to hear their commitments and their plans to actually put that right. That for me was a very powerful opportunity to start that process.

[141] We meet with the managing directors within Welsh Government once a

month, not to hold their pulse or to check them, but to discuss progress, significantly around the inspections and the extent to which they share that good practice. They know that the five key areas that the Wales Audit Office and Estyn brought out in the very first review are still a challenge in terms of consistency, clarity, governance, the balance between collaboration and competition and the extent to which they're embedding local planning with regional planning. They're a constant—they know that's what good practice actually enables. There's a lot more, which is school-to-school improvement, fulfilling their roles and working with Welsh Government, delivering reform, particularly around the new curriculum, professional standards for teachers, the leadership academy and their role in leadership in schools. But, fundamentally, they know what the core elements of an effective school improvement service looks like.

[142] **Rhianon Passmore:** You've sort of touched on evaluation across the consortia. In terms of the auditor general's priority, which he's outlined previously, what are the biggest challenges now in terms of the consortia in moving forward, out of all of that that you've just touched upon, or are they all equal?

[143] **Mr Davies:** If you look at the biggest challenge in terms of the reform agenda—and I'll come back to that—it is around landing the work on the new curriculum and the pioneer schools work.

[144] **Rhianon Passmore:** Okay, thank you.

[145] **Mr Evans:** We're engaged in quite a wholesale reform of the structure of education, but the bit that we can never take our eye off are two things, I think: first is the quality of the teaching in the classroom and the second is the quality of the leadership. I think that, as part of the recommendations of both the OECD and of the Wales Audit Office and Estyn—. There will be a statement made tomorrow, for example, on the leadership academy, which is fundamental to this, but also things like re-energising ITET—teacher training—but also how we link that teacher training with continuing professional development—

[146] **Rhianon Passmore:** Can you touch a little bit—? I'm conscious of time, Chair. Can you touch a little bit in terms of—obviously there's an announcement coming up on the leadership academy—but the importance of that and how you feel the leadership academy is going to, in a sense, hopefully, move us forwards in terms of that transformational agenda? How

important is that?

[147] **Nick Ramsay:** Feel free to be brief.

[148] **Mr Davies:** It's critical. The OECD have recognised it; we put our hands up before they came. Leadership is one of the most significant areas where it's been weak in terms of development in Welsh Government, as pointed out in all reports. It's going to be arm's length and there'll be more detail published tomorrow from the Minister. It will have the brief to set the agenda for leadership, not just within schools, but across the system: local authorities and regional services. It will not be a deliverer of services; the expectation is that it will license training, set agendas and will look at the professional leadership standards. It will also review the NPQH—the national professional qualification for headteachers—but it will have that arm's-length capacity.

[149] **Rhianon Passmore:** Sorry, Chair, but one more final point. In terms of growing capacity, it's a huge issue. Can you just outline, very, very quickly, because of time, I believe, exactly where you're at?

[150] **Nick Ramsay:** [*Inaudible.*—final point. I want to bring Mohammad Asghar in pretty soon.

[151] **Mr Davies:** As a requirement of the OECD, we were already doing it—moving to a national approach to professional learning. It's beyond what I described earlier—CPD and just going and tracking it. Every school and every headteacher, with all of his or her staff, has an approach to the professional learning of those teachers. The new professional standards deliver that: they set expectations around teachers collaborating; they set expectations around teachers innovating. So, that professional learning model with the professional standards will be the backbone to building the capacity and it's being done at the same time and aligned to the development of the new curriculum. So, our pioneers are looking at the curriculum content and the development of the capacity of staff to deliver at the same time.

[152] **Nick Ramsay:** Okay. Mohammad Asghar.

[153] **Mohammad Asghar:** Chair, I am very interested in the points I'm learning here. My first question to you both is: how is the Welsh Government responding to the OECD's recent report on education in terms of your strategy for school improvement in Wales?

[154] **Mr Evans:** The biggest high-level take-out, I suppose, from the recent visit was that generally, things are on the right trajectory. It's been very clear about the areas that we need to put a bit more pace into, but, generally, I think one of the great things that came out of it was that we are sort of on the right direction, and that's an issue, because, as we've heard here, one of the things we've been very keen to do is make sure there was stability and we have credibility on the path we're taking.

[155] **Mr Davies:** Critically, the developing 'Qualified for Life 2', which Owen mentioned, will be our response to that. But there are five key things we're doing. One is the implementation of the new curriculum—it tells us to get on with it. That will not be delivered unless we have four—I always describe it as a stool; you've got the seat and you've got four legs. One is teachers. The second is leaders. The third is what I call equity and well-being; it's about additional learning needs and the well-being—you can have a fantastic curriculum, fantastic teachers, but if children can't access it because of the challenges they face—. And then, lastly, what I've described as the assessment and evaluation model. It's the system we use to measure effectiveness, and we've had examples of a distortion by having the wrong figures—rightly carried out at that time for what I've described earlier—but we have methods of assessing schools that have unintended consequences.

[156] So, those are the 'what'. It's telling us that we must have a cohesion to our planning. As well as having a simple, 'Don't bring lots of new reforms'—make it simple. I've tried to give the stool with four legs. It is simple—if you want a new curriculum, you can't deliver it without the four other things. So, make it simple, get your infrastructure right, build the capacity of regions further—that's what they're telling us, and they're challenging us to bring in ALN as part of that. They're also challenging us in terms of co-construction. What they're saying is, 'Don't go out there and tell them how to do it or how you're going to do it. Don't develop your policy without working alongside them. Don't develop your implementation plan without engaging and working with them'. And then, last of all—and it was the point you made earlier about communications—get your communications right, particularly celebrating the things that are your success, because Wales, as they believe—we're not good at doing that within an education context.

[157] **Mohammad Asghar:** One area we haven't covered in this whole meeting yet is the stress-related retirements, or early—you know, leaving school. Of the quality teachers, a high proportion are leaving schools. That is

another setback for our children, to lose out on the best teachers to teach our children. And you haven't touched—anybody—yet, and there's a very large proportion.

[158] **Mr Evans:** I think we have touched on it, but not directly. I think one of the things the Cabinet Secretary has been very strong on is that we need to recognise that this is a profession, that this is something that people do that they should be proud of, and something that they do that we should be proud of. And I think, through the new professional standards that we're bringing in, and the support we're putting in to the system, back to capacity building, I think, if we get that right, we can actually demonstrate to people that this is a great profession, which is valued. That will go some way to address it. Steve, I don't know if you want to—.

[159] **Mr Davies:** You can do that, but you've also got to have the other things. We're looking to have a curriculum that's not 3 miles wide and 1 inch thick, so teachers have got lots of different planning to do just to meet it. That's not giving teachers an easy time; it's giving them more flexibility in terms of their planning. What teachers say about the pressure is that quite often it's about your accountability system—'I've got to pass these tests'. Testing and assessing pupils is important, to know children's progress, but we bring pressures on children and on teachers through our approach to that. And the Cabinet Secretary is on record as reviewing our accountability system. So, that is going to be important as well.

[160] And, as Owen said, lastly, teachers who have the opportunity to go and learn and work with other teachers and find solutions recognise the benefits to them. And, so, all of these factors together, we believe, will impact on not just recruitment—because we want teachers to come to Wales because of what they're going to get—but, also, on the stress levels, on the pressure levels, so that we create an aspiration to carry on working, and not, as in the latest survey of the Education Workforce Council, 30 per cent of our teachers saying that they're considering leaving the profession.

[161] **Mohammad Asghar:** And finally, Chair, the thing is, best practice is not rolling out in our country, in Wales. In one primary school in Newport, which I know, they teach parents literacy and numeracy—never heard of it. But when I saw the teacher and I heard about it—'It's my work'. The teacher is giving voluntary time to teach parents, after school hours, because that will help for parents to teach children. So, literacy and numeracy, which I think Scotland is—. Only yesterday, the First Minister was talking about that they're not

achieving where they actually put the targets. We don't want to follow the Scottish. We've got to invent some new rules on this to improve our children's literacy and numeracy in the next five years.

15:15

[162] **Mr Evans:** Just to be brief, I think you're right—I think one of the things we liked in Finland was how systemically they involve the parents in any weaknesses that their child might have. I think there are some schools in Wales that do it fantastically already, but the one thing we haven't actually discussed today, but it is important, and we are working through it at the moment, is the role of the higher education in all this. I think there is also a role for higher education to come in and help teachers and parents develop their own understanding of these subjects so they can help at home.

[163] **Mohammad Asghar:** And that is only primary schools, Chair. Thank you.

[164] **Nick Ramsay:** Okay. Lee Waters, then Mike Hedges.

[165] **Lee Waters:** Yes. There are a couple of things that Owen Evans has said that don't correlate with the information I get when I speak to teachers at the school level. One is that your view that the school-to-school learning is right. From the example we've just had, there is world-leading practice in Welsh schools, but the feedback I'm getting is that there is still not enough being done to spread that around. It may be better than it was, but it's still nowhere near where it should be. And secondly, your point about the balance between challenge and support. When I ask headteachers a standard question I ask when I visit, which is, 'What do you think of the consortium?' I usually get a nervous laugh, followed by, 'They're better on the challenge than they are on support.' Your view that that was right too troubled me.

[166] The picture I did recognise was Steve Davies's point about the unintended consequence of trying to target the lower end of the ability, and from what I understand, some directors of education are pushing heads to game the system, to get the number of C-level passes. And one of the ways that's being done is through early entry into exams, which is creating a lot of stress in the classroom, and also not stretching some children who could be pushed beyond the C, but they've been left parked at C, bagged at C, which was the phrase I think you used, Mr Davies. That is a picture I recognise. So, just specifically on the point of early entries as a way of gaming the system, I

know it's something that the Minister is aware of, but what can you do just to stop that happening?

[167] **Mr Davies:** Okay. Well, first of all, the first thing that we have to do, which we're doing with Qualifications Wales, is identify the scale of the problem. Qualifications Wales will be publishing, in September, a report on that. I think it's safe to say that we are concerned about the volumes of early entry. Welsh Government education advice and support is: you make decisions on early entry in the interests of an individual child. And there will be some exceptions. What has happened this year is, because of the uncertainty of some of the schools, they put a large number early because they didn't—. It's almost to test the system. I do believe, though, that there are also those out there who are gaming. With 205 schools, there will be people—. And to be honest with you, sometimes that's a pressure that the system we have puts on them. So, your headteacher who's worrying about Estyn coming—you are measuring, they're going to measure, we're going to measure by this system. I'm not in any way justifying it—what I can say is that I can understand that people will resort to that.

[168] We're reviewing it. The Cabinet Secretary, as you said, is very aware of it. We will, in the light of that review, want to take action in the early part of the autumn term, probably before—no, definitely before, schools will be considering which pupils they'll be entering early for November. We'll be working with challenge advisors across all of the five regions, giving advice and asking them, in terms of their involvement with schools around the early entry, to justify why it's in the individual interests of those particular children. It's not going by every child, but it's applying that principle with more rigour. The Cabinet Secretary may well decide to go further than that, in that process, in terms of the steps that she's going to put in place. It will be determined by the outcome of the review.

[169] **Lee Waters:** Thank you.

[170] **Nick Ramsay:** And Mike Hedges.

[171] **Mike Hedges:** Three very brief questions. I think you might want to write to me on one of them. But surely, any school which wants to get good A-level results wants to get its pupils through at A*. If we look at the Durham predictor, A* at GCSE is the best predictor of a good A-level that exists. So, surely, schools are looking at that. The second thing I'm sure you would like to write to me and this committee on is Schools Challenge Cymru. We talked

about those 40 schools and we've mentioned the other 160-plus. Can you produce a percentage improvement or not of GCSE results against the standard four—maths, English and whatever goes in there—for those that are in the challenge and those that are not? I don't expect you to have that now, but can you? And, what has been the role of the Moodle in improvement?

[172] **Mr Evans:** I'll just pick up on the Schools Challenge Cymru one. We have those data and we'd be very happy to share them with the committee, so we'll write to you on that.

[173] **Mr Davies:** On good schools, if you look at A-levels, I agree with you, they would recognise A*. The pressure on many of our schools is that, historically, they've not been measured strongly by their A-level performances. The majority of the public—. They were last year because of the fall in A-levels across Wales, so I'd agree with you that that should be the aspiration of all schools: to wish for their students, whether in their own schools or elsewhere, to go on to do good science A-levels. The reality is that there are many who are not. As I said, there will be those who are, but there are many who are not, and that's part of our challenge to them.

[174] I'm probably going to have to come back to you on the role of Moodle as well, because I haven't done a recent evaluation of that, but I can look to colleagues to come to a view. Whether we'd have detailed research on it, I'm not certain.

[175] **Mike Hedges:** Okay, thank you very much.

[176] **Nick Ramsay:** And finally, finally, Neil McEvoy.

[177] **Neil McEvoy:** I wonder if you could share any data or any reports that you wrote after visiting Finland. I'd be interested in seeing that.

[178] **Mr Evans:** I've written an internal report.

[179] **Mr Davies:** I've given you my report as well.

[180] **Mr Evans:** Yes. As soon as we came back, I wrote a report and Steve has added to it and we shared it with colleagues and went through the learning from that. We discussed it with special advisers and the Cabinet Secretary.

[181] **Nick Ramsay:** Is that purely an internal report?

[182] **Mr Evans:** Purely internal.

[183] **Nick Ramsay:** Would it be possible for the committee to have any sight of it or its conclusions? Or headlines, I should say.

[184] **Mr Evans:** I can give you headlines, yes. That's no problem at all. It was a very interesting visit.

[185] **Mr Davies:** It focused on what we could bring back.

[186] **Mr Evans:** Yes, and there were some great ideas there. There were some interesting parallels as well about stuff we're doing and how they may have either done it the same and it has worked, so that's good, or how we could improve it. But it was an interesting trip. I also visited South Korea two years ago for a completely different system, but high performing in certain respects and I did the same there as well and there was a lot of learning to be pulled from there.

[187] **Nick Ramsay:** Good. That was a useful last question. Thanks, Neil McEvoy. We've run over slightly, but there were lots of questions for you, as you could tell, and you certainly enthused the committee. Can I thank Steve Davies and Owen Evans for being with us today? That's been really helpful. We'll provide you with a transcript before it's finalised just to make sure that you're happy with the accuracy.

[188] **Mr Evans:** Okay, thank you.

[189] **Nick Ramsay:** Thank you.

15:23

**Cynnig o dan Reol Sefydlog 17.42 i Benderfynu Gwahardd y Cyhoedd
o'r Cyfarfod**

**Motion under Standing Order 17.42 to Resolve to Exclude the Public
from the Meeting**

Cynnig:

Motion:

bod y pwyllgor yn penderfynu that the committee resolves to

*gwahardd y cyhoedd o weddill y exclude the public from the reminder
cyfarfod yn unol â Rheol Sefydlog of the meeting in accordance with
17.42(vi). Standing Order 17.42(vi).*

*Cynigiwyd y cynnig.
Motion moved.*

[190] **Nick Ramsay:** I propose, in accordance with Standing Order 17.42 that the committee meets in private for item 5 of today's meeting. Happy? Yes.

*Derbyniwyd y cynnig.
Motion agreed.*

*Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 15:23.
The public part of the meeting ended at 15:23.*