

This paper outlines:

A collaborative approach to delivering the RARS Strategy and securing improvement, evaluation and accountability: Central South Consortium (CSC) and Merthyr Tydfil Local Authority (LA)

The RARS strategy is a comprehensive document which will lead Merthyr Tydfil through this period of significant policy reform in education. It will also allow the LA to build capacity and focus its own improvement priorities for education services. It has suitable aims and principles which will support schools, the LA and CSC as a key delivery partner well for the coming 5 years.

Due to the impact of the pandemic on all our lives, and specifically the subsequent changes to school life, as well as the changes to accountability expectations nationally, it is timely to refine some details in our evaluation, improvement and accountability arrangements and use the strategy to step forward. This tactical realignment and refocusing of priorities will allow schools, CSC and LA to work together to lead recovery, build on learning achieved through blended learning, and to actively support the workforce through a new context for schooling. This will require:-

- a unique approach to supporting every school;
- the engagement and commitment of school leaders, political leaders and improvement partners towards a focused purposeful set of priorities;
- use the new national approach to setting unique school priorities and each school's SIP to drive focused improvement;
- acknowledgment of the accelerated changes schools have made in the last 12 months to support pupils, families and learning in a range of contexts;
- recognition of the reframing and subsequent 'step up' which each school, and each staff team will now need support to do, to respond to the challenges of the new curriculum; ALN Act; the impact of the pandemic on learners and staff; the opportunity of technology; and a renewed relationship with the school community; and
- refine and reduce the expectations on schools to engage with specific projects and focus on priorities in line with need and national policy.

We know from research that post Covid studies in schools has highlighted that:

- the poorest children and communities will be disproportionately affected and that a renewed focus on reducing education inequality is a priority;
- that the principles of improvement and self-evaluation are critical for schools as they build on the work undertaken under pressure; and are specifically critical to support leaders to flex to meet their individual community/ school and pupil needs;
- the focus on key priorities and prioritising the most important aspects of engagement with core skills and family buy-in has been important.

We know from our regular keeping in touch and support and challenge conversations with schools in Merthyr Tydfil that:

- overall schools have reached out to parents well and even the most hard to reach pupils have engaged in learning; schools have made their offer flexible according to need e.g. schools have made recorded lessons available and in some cases student have been accessing these later in the night, also bespoke packages according to pupil needs have been structured.
- schools have worked to maintain motivation by celebrating pupil attendance and engagement with blended learning.
- school leaders are working with Improvement Partners to manage their own and staff wellbeing and highlighting concerns about workload, emotional pressures and stress;

- working under pressure has enabled many schools to outperform expectations. For example, they have successfully struck a balance with blended learning that has allowed for engagement with the home, support learning in core skills and maintain momentum in learning.

The opportunity therefore to step up and move forward based on this local experience within a wider context of empirical learning from beyond the LA is the opportunity for CSC and the LA to combine our support for schools and respond to Welsh Government's Guidance. This approach, will:

- allow us to build our combined knowledge of schools and supporting us to support them in the implementation of the RARS strategy. We will review the conditions and capacity for improvement, and focus intervention where and when it is needed;
- allow improvement partners to use focused discussions with all schools to prioritise the support for learners as they return to learning on site and make sure that the trauma and impact of the pandemic are managed in all schools to support all learners but specifically the more vulnerable;
- enhance the range of information available for scrutiny by elected members. We will widen the breadth of information available at LA level and link it explicitly to the 5 strategic goals of the strategy and the 2 overarching themes;
- engage schools in actively refining the strategy so that it reflects the leadership capacity in schools across the local authority. We will work with school leaders to build on their experiences of leading through the pandemic and learn how to step forward on this basis, making sure schools own this process;
- enhance and build on capacity in schools to self-evaluate, and drive improvement;
- provide regular, relevant opportunities for monitoring progress, capacity and risk across the schools and the services which support them. We will dovetail intelligence regularly and make sure it is evidence based and accurate. This evidence will support the range of internal and external improvement, evaluation and accountability requirements.
- include an objective base line from which to judge progress against the strategic themes, and from which to monitor progress. This will take the form of an annual school snapshot.

The plan to monitor, support improvement and raise aspiration has to meet many needs at once by reducing burden of unnecessary workload and repetitive accountabilities.

Welsh Government's Draft Guidance for evaluation, improvement and accountability

WG's draft guidance sets out explicit key principles. The following are direct quotes from the draft guidance which support the planned way forward in Merthyr Tydfil.

'Robust evaluation and accountability arrangements to support a self-improving system' is one of the four enabling objectives of the new curriculum. To be successful, it is crucial that all aspects of the school's system are aligned with and support the new curriculum and its underlying principles. The OECD's report to Welsh Government, 'Achieving the new curriculum for Wales', emphasised this point. The report is clear that the accountability framework, along with school-leaving qualifications, need to align with the new curriculum principles in order to avert the risk that misaligned accountability and qualification measures undermine the curriculum.'

Within this framework, there is a clear distinction between evaluation and improvement activities and accountability. The majority of the energy and focus in the system should be on delivering school improvement, guided by effective self-evaluation, improvement planning and support in all schools.

The accountability system, in contrast, is the safety net for when evaluation and improvement is not functioning effectively. It should not drive school improvement activity, although it should ensure that problems are identified and addressed. Therefore, alongside the improvement and support roles played by local authorities and regional consortia, the system requires effective democratic accountability and governance arrangements.

These are the three main purposes for the use of information in the new system. Often, different types and levels of information will be relevant and appropriate for the different purposes.

Improvement – is for the learner. A wide range of information supports effective self-evaluation and improvement at all tiers of the system. At school level, it supports schools to continually improve and to give all learners the best possible education. It will therefore include information covering the whole school, as well as at an aggregate and individual pupil level. For other tiers of the system, a wide range of information will be used to support self-evaluation and continuous improvement of service delivery to support the education system.

Accountability – is for governance purposes. Information available and used for this purpose will help governing bodies, local and diocesan authorities and regional consortia to oversee the quality of delivery by their own organisations and, in doing so, to fulfil their democratic accountability functions. While not all of the information that is used to inform accountability processes needs to be publically available, we would expect the outcomes to be. For example, via Governing Body reports or local authority Scrutiny Committee minutes.

Transparency – is for the wider citizen, telling us about how well both individual bodies and the system is doing. It will include national level information (e.g. PISA data), as well as some information at a sub-national and school level (e.g. Estyn inspection outcomes), and be easily accessible. This should build and secure public confidence in the Welsh education system.

Under each of these main purposes for information, the Welsh Government's aim is to:

- Increase the use of the widest and richest possible range of information to inform self-evaluation and improvement within schools' own context;
- Clarify the use of information for accountability purposes, so that this does not inhibit schools' improvement or drive negative behaviours;
- Increase the range and quality of information available publically about schools and the wider system to increase transparency and public confidence;
- Set clear expectations about the ownership and use of information. While the immediate aims may differ, all three purposes should ultimately contribute to improving the learning experiences and outcomes of pupils. P8'

In using information, **schools, local authorities, diocesan authorities and regional consortia** should:

- Reduce their reliance on narrow measures of student attainment to evaluate schools.
- Use a balanced approach that draws on a coherent and comprehensive set of qualitative and quantitative information, aligned to the new curriculum, in a non-hierarchical manner. This information will be unique to each school.
- Ensure that school leaders, teachers and support staff are not distracted from their work with learners to gather and retain often considerable and unnecessary, quantities of evidence to satisfy different requirements.

Schools should:

- Use a wide range of information to look at the progress of all pupils and the systems that support them, in order to arrive at a holistic view of learner progression.

- Draw on a wide range of different types of information, covering the breadth of school activity – including learner progress, well-being and the realisation of the four purposes – to inform self-evaluation (consistent with the principles in the next chapter)
- Select information used for self-evaluation dependent on their own context, needs and priorities.
- Consider carefully, and within context, the use of comparative information, and consider how it can support increased collaboration between schools and the sharing of effective practice.
- Make effective use of information they hold themselves for the purpose of self-evaluation, as well as using a wide range of evidence either made available to them by others or which they have sourced.

Local authorities and regional consortia, and diocesan authorities (where appropriate), should work in partnership to:

- Make available to schools any information they hold which would be beneficial for schools' self-evaluation (e.g. attendance analyses produced by the local authority), as part of a culture of partnership working.
- Share relevant information and intelligence about schools between each other, reinforcing their professional partnership.
- Consider school level evidence and information to:
 - o help determine schools' support needs and capacity to support others; and
 - o contribute to their own self-evaluation of their services to support schools (e.g. direct support; professional learning; use of intervention powers). This, in turn, should inform Councils' review of their performance at a corporate, strategic level.

Learner assessment information should not be used for accountability purposes. The purpose of assessment is to support individual learner progression. Local authorities and regional consortia must not, therefore, collate and aggregate school level data or create specific local arrangements to gather individual pupil level information.

Councils should:

- put arrangements in place to set expectations and manage the quality and impact of any shared service providing support to schools;
- make arrangements to implement sustainable improvement strategies to support schools, both in delivering their own direct services and in partnership with their regional school improvement consortium;
- use the information it holds about the performance of its Education function to inform the broader strategic level understanding of how the council is operating as a whole, is using its resources, and delivering for the people in its area;
- use a broad range of information to monitor and understand well the performance of schools in their area, rather than a narrow focus on pupil attainment measures;
- build on this broad range of information to support schools and, where necessary, to identify and intervene in schools causing concern, using the full range of statutory powers;
- not put pressure on schools to make short term gains in KS4 examination outcomes, in a way that may not be sustainable or in the interests of all learners;
- support head teachers to improve their schools and build capacity, taking into account the level of challenge. (They should not, for example, place unrealistic expectations on newly appointed school leaders in schools with longstanding issues.)

Scrutiny Committees should:

- hold Cabinet members to account for the quality and impact of the Council's services to support schools;

- scrutinise the work of the Council with regard to the services provided to support schools, rather than using their accountability arrangements to hold schools to account;
- scrutinise how effectively the local authority works with the regional consortium, understanding that accountability for regional consortia is through their Joint Committee or Company Board (see below);
- monitor and scrutinise the use of statutory powers to support and improve schools causing concern, in particular secondary schools.
- consider the impact of decisions to reorganise schools on the improvement of schools.

Next steps for Merthyr Tydfil

Together, the LA and CSC have developed an early draft of proposals which are open to consultation, engagement and development with elected members and schools. Over the coming weeks we will work jointly to shape and refine these new arrangements to support our local work in line with the emerging expectations of Welsh Government. This is a significant opportunity to reform our way of working and support the policy and curriculum reforms within education and school improvement.

Our current proposals include:

- developing a suite of success indicators which will support the RARS priorities and support school level capacity building and improvement;
- working with schools to develop a whole county progress framework for key areas
- a school snapshot which captures core school improvement priorities (replacing statutory targets) and recognising each school's improvement within its own context.