



**Report to Joint Committee on the  
Capacity of Challenge Advisers**

## **1. Introduction**

This report has been prepared in response to a request from the Joint Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2017. The request was to collate a full picture of the capacity of Challenge Advisers across the region to deliver effective school improvement services and propose recommendations for improvement.

The Joint Committee received correspondence from the Chair of Scrutiny in relation to the number Challenge Advisers employed within the region and requested a report on the issues. Following consideration of the risk register, the Joint Committee agreed that the report should be extended to include the quality, performance and deployment of advisors and support staff and recommendations as to how to respond to the risks identified in the Internal Audit report

The report highlights key areas for development and recommendations for the Joint Committee. It has been informed by Joint Committee documents, the risk register and feedback from recent Headteacher and Challenge Adviser surveys.

## **2. Context**

The report has been informed by documents considered by the Joint Committee relating to the Risk Register, Internal Audit Report and responses to the July 2017 Headteacher Survey.

The ERW risk register includes the following risks at Central Team level:-

- (Estyn) Inspection of the region finds less than adequate standards, provision and leadership
- Insufficient capacity of the Central Team and Challenge Adviser Team to deliver Business Plan to high standards, and maintain the levels of progress seen in ERW in recent years
- Governance footing of ERW found to be ineffective at securing consistent improvement across all LAs, recognizing that some LAs make good progress.
- Failure to address or implement key areas of the ERW business plan
- Limited capacity risks undermining ability of ERW to respond at pace and with impact to new National Model
- Letters from Welsh Government raising concerns that regions is not using regional grants within the spirit and terms and conditions. Risk funding may be withdrawn
- Individual LAs fail to comply with Grant Terms and Conditions.

At Local Authority level, the Risk Register includes the following risks which applied to the six authorities reporting, albeit with slightly different assessments of likelihood and impact :-

- Inconsistencies in support to schools due to variability in the work of Challenge Advisers
- Categorisation judgements undermined by a proportion of Advisers not following processes
- Insufficient monitoring of and support to schools causing concern
- LA staff including Challenge Advisers unnecessarily undertaking activities outside regional strategy
- Failure to continue to raise standards especially for EFSM pupils

The 2015-16 Internal Audit Opinion and Assurance Statement included the following:-

- Support agreed by Challenge Advisers following visits was not always in line with recommendations made/ areas of improvement identified. Further improvement is required to ensure targeted concise recommendations are made
- Support delivered by Challenge Advisers is not always in line with the support package agreed as part of the Core Visit, with variations also identified between the support entitlement and the number of days actually delivered.
- As Local Authority action/Improvement plans are not consistently received by the ERW Central Team it is difficult to determine whether the support is being targeted correctly to fully aid Improvement within these schools

The key improvement issues identified in the Headteacher Survey reported to the Joint Committee in July 2017 have been summarised as follows:-

- Support is not sufficiently tailored to meet needs of schools, only 61% of respondents believed it met well the allocation entitlement of the categorisation process. Another 31% found it only adequate.
- There is a need for more school to school Networking, sharing of good practice and more knowledge of schools which should be used as benchmarks
- There is a high turnover of Challenge Advisors in schools which is disruptive to school progress and development. This was exacerbated by the commissioned Headteacher model in some cases.
- All Challenge Advisors need to be well prepared before visiting schools.

- There needs to be greater consistency in the work of Challenge Advisers at Local Authority level and across the Consortium. There is a divide in the experience schools in different local authorities have received. Surveys show this.
- Some Challenge Advisers were described as too focussed on interrogating the data and not engaging with the work of the school. Despite this, 84% of HTs felt that the core visits carried out by ChAds understood the school's strengths and weaknesses very well and that 84% felt that categorisation was delivered effectively. There is however variation in each LA related to this judgement.
- There is a lack of regional consistency and understanding of the role of ERW and what it stands for.

It should be noted that the concerns of Headteachers and the risks identified by the Joint Committee continue to be addressed by the Consortium Central Team and by partner authorities. The Consortium and its partner authorities can demonstrate numerous areas of good practice, excellent outcomes and innovations which are delivering a positive impact for learners. The purpose of this report is to identify opportunities to built the capacity and systems of the Consortium to ensure that best performance becomes a standard achieved across the region so that pupils in every setting have an opportunity to excel.

The concerns and identified areas for improvement outlined above have helped to shape this report on the regional arrangements for Challenge Advisers and other school Improvement staff. The report addresses staffing numbers, consistency and compliance, accountability and line management, the national standards and other school improvement staff.

### 3. Staffing Numbers

When ERW was established, an agreement was made between directors that 58 FTE Challenge Advisers would be provided between the 6 Local Authorities to allow ERW to carry out its work in monitoring, supporting, challenging and intervening in schools.

The following numbers were agreed:

LA	Full time equivalent (FTE)
Carmarthenshire	12.48
Pembrokeshire	7.73
Ceredigion	5.99
Powys	10.28

NPT	8.95
Swansea	12.52

The original agreement made in March 2012 was reaffirmed by Directors in September 2015.

The number of staff employed varies from term to term due to a staff turnover and use of secondments including commissioned headteachers. During the academic year 2016-17 the number of Challenge Advisers working in the region varied between 39 and 45. In July 2017 the number of FTE Challenge Advisers engaged to work in September 2017 was 41.7

LA	Current FTEs	Vacant posts	Permanent staff	Fixed term	Seconded staff	Commissioned HTs	Consultant
Pembs	6	1.73	3.5	1	1.5	0	
Carms	7	5.48	3				
NPT	7.5	1.95	6	0	1	0	
Swansea	8	6.52	4.2		1	1.7	0.1
Ceredigion	5.7	0.29	4.9	0	0.8	0	0
Powys	8	2.28	8	0	0	0	0
Total	41.7	18.25	26.6	1	3.5	1.7	0.1

Based on information received from LAs the above table outlines current Challenge Adviser numbers in each LA.

Ceredigion and NPT have historically been at or close to full quota.

There are also 4 Challenge Advisers employed by the ERW central team on a part time basis to support secondary schools in Pembrokeshire and Powys. These are in addition to the LA employed advisers, providing recent school leadership experience and adding capacity to the local team.

The employment and deployment of Challenge Advisers is undertaken by Local Authorities independently of the ERW Central Team, leading to variation in approach between authorities and schools. Too often it is unclear if these staff meet the required national standards for Challenge Advisers.

Some Challenge Advisers also undertake other roles for a proportion of their time. Those proportions are determined by the employing authorities and tend to be interpreted pragmatically. As there is no regional system to apportion Challenge Adviser time there can be no certainty about the hours actually committed to Challenge Adviser activity and no basis to make judgements about the productivity of the staff employed.

ERW is the only consortium in Wales which does not directly employ, deploy or performance manage regional Challenge Advisers. The best efforts of the Central Consortium team and six partner authorities to achieve a consistent approach has not been fully successful to date. Whilst some progress has been achieved through regionally managed and delivered training, not all Challenge Advisers attend. In addition, there is a high turnover of seconded headteachers in the team which affect continuity. This also affects attendance at training, as does other commitments outside 'school improvement'. Furthermore, there is a lack of a regional approach to induction for the permanent, part time and temporary roles being undertaken.

The number of schools in ERW has reduced during the period 2012-2017 but there has been no formal agreement to review the irreducible minimum number of Challenge Advisers. As there is no collective information about the productivity of Challenge Advisers, the data necessary to accurately review the numbers on a regional basis does not exist. Currently the ERW Challenge Capacity is 16.3 FTE below the agreed 'irreducible minimum' number, even assuming that the agreed percentage of Challenge Advisor time allocated is delivered.

495 = 2017

532 = 2012

#### **4. Consistency and Compliance**

There is no uniform adoption of the national standards for Challenge Advisers, resulting in inconsistencies in expectation and deployment. There are no common job descriptions across the region, enabling local flexibilities and sustaining previous practices which have minimised impact on schools. Discussions on inconsistencies have taken place, and additional support has been made available. Regular compliance reports are taken to Executive Board to highlight these issues.

However, this has compromised opportunities for more consistent regional practices to be developed, clarity of roles to be understood and coherent processes for performance management and staff development to be introduced. These inconsistencies are also reflected in staff undertaking similar roles on different terms.

The ERW central team provide guidance to all Challenge Advisers to seek to improve consistency of approach in support, challenge and intervention in schools. This includes sharing of effective strategies to support school causing concern and to establish consistently high expectations amongst Headteachers across the region. However, the day to day pressures on Challenge Advisers undertaking additional and different roles, directed by Local Authority managers, means that the impact of central efforts to establish consistency and support high standards are undermined, particularly when too many Challenge Advisers are unable to attend scheduled training and briefing events.

Summative reports are prepared by Hub leads to draw together the key themes from Challenge Adviser visits annually. Review of this documentation by the Central Team reveals high levels of support required to bring reports to a standard fit for publication; reports too often describe data and fail to make definitive judgements. Coaching and further training has not had the necessary impact, especially when Advisers do not meet the necessary standards on appointment. Significant variation and inconsistency have been identified, for example when being too generous with judgements (Estyn 2016) and not following guidance set in the Challenge Adviser handbook. In addition to inconsistencies in reporting, the Q A process has identified that arrangements to ensure agreed support and school actions are delivered but not consistently followed up with sufficient rigour.

The use of seconded Headteachers as Challenge Advisers is an important opportunity to secure recent and relevant school experience. Headteachers and other consultant Challenge Advisers brings additional challenges for line management, requiring strong infrastructure, effective induction and clear processes to secure identified support for their schools. The variability in the work of Challenge Advisers appears greater when externally commissioned consultants undertake the role. Headteachers welcome the peer support but more effective regional arrangements are needed to equip and support this talented (and high cost) Challenge Adviser resource. Effective Challenge Adviser support needs to be delivered as part of a coordinated, systematic and quality assured process in order to ensure authoritative, secure and consistent judgement about school progress across the region.

A key responsibility of the Challenge Advisor is to ensure that School Improvement grants (EIG, PDG, LAC) allocated to schools are deployed in accordance with School Development plans. Increasingly WG are placing accountability for grant spend with consortia but in the ERW region local authorities continue to fulfil this function. The absence of an effective link between the Challenge Adviser oversight of school use of key grants and the central team, limits the ability of the Consortium to deliver this key operational and financial accountability for grants management.

These arrangements also contribute to variability in grant funding and expectations between schools. It is inevitable that lack of consistency in these areas contributes to variable school performance.

These inconsistencies hinder ERW's ability to improve further and develop the region strongly and coherently and build on recent strong foundation and progress.

There is a risk of creating reputational damage which undermines all ERW partners. The recent Headteacher survey results also reflect the consequential confusion of some Headteachers as to the key purposes of the Consortium and the respective accountabilities of ERW and the Local Authorities. Almost a third of Head teachers in ERW feel that communication is less than effective. In other regions in Wales accountabilities are more clear.

## **5. Accountability and Line Management**

Accountability for the employment of Challenge Advisers rests with Local Authority partners. Whilst the Local Authorities have established operational hubs of paired authorities to manage the geography of the region, the deployment and performance management of Challenge Advisers is managed by each local Authority and each takes a different approach.

The quality assurance of Challenge Adviser work is the responsibility of their Local Authority line managers, both Heads of Hub and Principal Challenge Advisers. Heads of Hub lead and deploy staff within the paired local authorities with Principal Challenge Advisers appointed by authorities to undertake additional complex or supervisory roles. However, there is no consistency across the region.

Currently, the ERW Central team have limited oversight of the work of Challenge Advisers. Quality assurance processes, undertaken by a senior manager in ERW, focus almost entirely on the Challenge Adviser school visit reports and progress against recommendations made as a result of ESTYN inspections and core visits. Whilst this process has limitations, it is sufficient to reveal inconsistencies in the work in supporting schools, delivering National priorities and in responding to school underperformance. This matches the experiences reported by Headteachers.

Challenge Advisers currently identify themselves in terms of their local authority employer. The weak links with ERW and lack of direct line management from the Central Team prevents the development and delivery of consistent Challenge Adviser improvement practice across the region.

From a consortium perspective the information, communication and management chain is too long and the links too weak. From a Headteacher perspective the quality of support is variable. 60% of HT respondents stated that they had received a good and relevant menu of support as a consequence of the adviser's visit to their school. The lack of consistent regional focus is further revealed when different Challenge Advisers attending the same school (due to turnover or lack of core staff) are seen to adopt different approaches based on their own expertise rather than the needs of the school, and when the feedback is analyzed on an LA level.

There are examples of effective work being delivered by some excellent and experienced Challenge Advisers but performance across the region is inconsistent. There can be little doubt that this is a significant contributory factor to the current variability in school performance. Whilst Challenge Advisers remain accountable to and deployed by the six local Authority partners, inconsistency in approach, prioritisation and impact will continue.



Arrangements have been put in place to support colleagues to learn from each other's practice, these include training using best and worst practice in writing, master classes on writing evaluatively for data analysis. In addition, shadowing opportunities have been made available across partner authorities. However, many Challenge Advisers have not taken advantage of these opportunities. Similarly, feedback on ChAd judgements are provided at regional moderation events for categorisation. However, again advisers do not respond to the feedback given systematically, and this information is not consistently used to manage or improve performance

## **6. Meeting National Standards**

The National Standards for Challenge Advisers has 4 aspects, each with a specific group of skills linked to that aspect. Each ChAd is expected to be able to comply with the standards

Annually, Challenge Advisers complete an anonymous self-assessment against the national standards. This helps the ERW Central team to shape training and provide further guidance and professional learning.

Advisers have reported over the last three years the following aspects of the standards which they are confident or less confident about. In 2017 Challenge Advisers are:-

- *more confident in their knowledge, skill and confidence when supporting and challenging schools on self-evaluation.*
- *able to and confident when building relationships effectively and motivating leaders in schools.*
- *less confident when engaging in difficult conversations although skills and confidence has improved slightly over three years.*
- *less confident when writing clear and concise reports although skills and confidence has improved over three years.*
- *becoming more confident in their knowledge, skills and confidence when brokering support and intervention; however, progress in this area has been slower than supporting self evaluation and developing school leadership.*
- *more confident when identifying resources and measuring the impact of support provided.*
- *less confident when brokering support and facilitating school to school support.*
- *fairly comfortable with coaching and supporting different levels of leadership in schools.*
- *less confident when developing levels of collective accountability and challenging leadership. ChAds are less confident when working with lead*

*practitioners in schools to facilitate a journey of improvement in other schools.<sup>1</sup>*

Self evaluation therefore of the core work being undertaken across the region demonstrate that elements of the skills and knowledge required to tackle key aspects of support and challenge to schools is not improving at a sufficient pace and that Challenge Adviser performance remains too variable.

This year, (2017), evaluations of our work across the region demonstrated that progress to tackle key aspects of support and challenge to schools was not improving at a sufficient pace, and that Challenge Adviser performance was too variable. The self-assessment survey then became personalised so that this became a more relevant and useful tool to measure self-assessment against actual performance. Up to 30% of advisers require development in these core areas.

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## **7. Other School Improvement Staff**

In addition to Challenge Advisers and their six management structures in the local authorities, there are a range of staff who work to deliver School Improvement. Local Authorities also employ specialist subject Advisers for different phases, local authorities also employ Athrawon Bro, Early Years specialists, LAC, Minority Ethnic support, ICT, Digital Leaders, Wellbeing Officers, Governor Support and Data management staff.

Subject specialists work across the region to support specific areas for improvement. The job titles, job descriptions, roles and pay vary across Local Authorities. The impact and quality of their work is also variable. This is identified through the support log on ERW's intranet which reveals inconsistencies, lack of sharing of good practice and potential duplication.

Subject specialist representatives from each Local Authority attend ERW working groups and contribute to the development of the menu of support. In addition, subject specialists across the region work jointly to develop support packages for schools to improve consistency of message. However, the ERW central team are not able to monitor, target or direct the work of individual subject specialists. As a result, the quality of support provided to schools varies across the region. This is especially an issue for school causing concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Summative report of Challenge Adviser self assessment against National Standards 2014-16.

The quality of report writing and the completion of the support log is too variable for schools causing concern, making it difficult for the ERW central team to monitor support activity in schools. In addition, a significant number of subject specialists develop resources independent of ERW and do not share these resources in a timely manner with colleagues in each LA. This results in further duplication and inconsistency, too often this work is neither recent nor relevant and does not take account of the latest national position or guidance.

Where highly able and potentially influential subject specialist are identified, the current structures limit their scope for impact and opportunities for regional Improvement are constrained. Feedback from support sessions provided by subject specialists still vary too greatly, despite the development of common packages. In addition there are examples of Local Authority officers offering advice to schools which conflicts with those messages provided by ERW's Leaders of Learning. This is a major cause of frustration amongst Headteachers and adversely affects the credibility of all involved.

These inconsistencies in practice, lost opportunities for collaboration and areas of potential duplication are also likely to apply to some degree to the management and deployment of other School Improvement staff groups identified. It is beyond the scope of this report to undertake a formal assessment of the potential benefits arising from bringing these staff under a single management structure. However, as the arrangements for reorganising Challenge Adviser arrangements are progressed, the processes for redefining the regional role in School Improvement should include the potential for other groups to transfer to the direct management of the Consortium.

Any transfer arrangements must also take into account the linguistic demands, cultural expectations and also the geographic opportunities and constraints if the region. Whilst the current Hub structures do not appear to be delivering the regional improvements required, some form of sub regional delivery structures with clear accountabilities to the Central Team are likely to be required to balance the need for improved outcomes and regional consistency with practical arrangements which minimise travel and non school time for these valuable staff groups.

## **8. Conclusions**

Since its establishment, ERW has done very well in driving improvement in school performance. This is to be celebrated. However, there are inconsistencies and a need to review the function, finance and structure of ERW to meet future demands and WG expectations.

When the region was established, arrangements for employing and deploying Challenge Advisers were agreed with a clear rationale to protect relationships between Challenge Advisers and schools and to ensure that the Local Authorities links with schools was not undermined. That arrangement has delivered some successes but is no longer fit for purpose.

Whilst the scope of this report was to identify capacity and quality of the current Challenge Advisers, it is clear that the current organisational design does not allow for consistent and effective recruitment, deployment and performance management. Variability adversely affects performance, credibility and Headteacher confidence.

Some measures to address the shortcomings identified in this report may be possible within existing organisational arrangements. However, the scale of changes needed across the six partner authorities can only be delivered effectively through a reorganisation which places the accountability for employing and deploying Challenge Advisers with the Consortium. Local Authorities should become commissioners rather than providers of core school improvement services.

In undertaking a review of arrangements for these key Challenge Adviser posts, it is inevitable that the impact on other School Improvement staff and residual local Authority roles will need to be addressed. The review should also examine closely the current use of grant funding to support School Improvement posts across the region. Current arrangements are overdependent on grant funding and lack resilience.

It is a credit to current managers, staff and Headteachers that there continue to be examples of good pupil progress in the Region despite current organisational complexities and diffuse accountability structures.

The change management processes required should build upon existing strengths and be developed in consultation with key partners, teaching associations and staff representatives.

The scope and form of the change will require careful consideration from all stakeholders. The development of key options are necessary now through the next stages of development, in parallel with decisions on funding.

## **9. Recommendations**

### **The Joint Committee agree to:**

- Instruct the Lead Chief Executive, Section 151 officer and Managing Director to establish a Programme Team with suitable governance structures and with access to the appropriate financial and HR information to manage the project of clarifying, scoping and shaping the accountability arrangements for the employment and deployment of school improvement staff including Challenge Advisers to enable the consortium to deliver a single effective school improvement service and to comply fully with WG requirements.
  
- Instruct the Lead Chief Executive, Section 151 officer and Managing Director and Programme Team to prepare a project plan bringing together the work of evolving the region with all grants by April 2018 and other resources, including staff from September 2018. The Programme Team scope and plan should include the following:

- To put in place clear plans to secure and maintain effective communication with and engagement of Directors, headteachers throughout the organization and secure consistent implementation of the Business Plan.
  - To clarify, agree and document the respective roles and accountabilities of the LAs and region in relation to all School Improvement functions and services.
  - To develop and cost an organisational delivery model to meet identified priorities, supported by a comprehensive and costed implementation plan.
  - To secure appropriately the current ERW Central Senior Leadership Team and develop strategic and operating capacity.
- Instruct the Managing Director to ensure that the above recommendations be undertaken in parallel with the findings of the report Review of Financial arrangements.