

SUBJECT:	IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MIDDLE TIER REVIEW
MEETING:	Cabinet
DATE:	January 22 2025
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	ALL

1. PURPOSE:

1.1 To present members with options to consider a new school improvement model, in response to the Welsh Government's 'Review of Roles and Responsibilities of Education Partners in Wales and Delivery of School Improvement Arrangements'.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet agree to extending a partnership with three other local authorities in the Gwent area, namely, Newport City Council, Torfaen County Borough Council and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. This partnership will be an extension and deepening of the existing relationship through the Southeast Wales Education Achievement Service (EAS).

2.2 It is further recommended that Cabinet notes that there are still ongoing discussions between the four authorities noted in paragraph 2.1 and Caerphilly County Borough Council and that these discussions, could, see Caerphilly remaining involved in the partnership in some manner. This would not materially affect the options or considerations set out in this paper.

3. KEY ISSUES:

3.1 The EAS was established in 2012, in response to the Education Minister Leighton Andrew's twenty-point education reform plan. The expectation was that all local authorities would participate in joint school improvement consortia arrangements. As of November 2024, the EAS continues to provide school improvement functions across Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, Torfaen.

3.2 Governance arrangements are secured through a Company Board which consists of membership from local elected members, a nominated lead Chief Executive and other non-Executive directors. The Joint Executive Group (JEG) is responsible for the service direction of the company and is made up of the five cabinet members for education from across the region.

3.3 In July 2023, the Welsh Government initiated a review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and the delivery of school improvement arrangements¹. This review was called the Middle Tier Review (MTR).

¹ [Written Statement: School improvement: the role and responsibilities of education partners \(12 July 2023\)](https://gov.wales/written-statement/school-improvement-the-role-and-responsibilities-of-education-partners-12-july-2023) | GOV.WALES

3.4 The MTR was led, on behalf of the Welsh Government, by Professor Dylan Jones with support from the ISOS Partnership. The MTR had the following goals:

3.5 To explore the features of the current system, identifying what works well and less well, and how improvements might be made.

3.6 To understand the breadth of views and experiences from across the system.

3.7 To identify how capacity, collaboration and ways of working can be improved for the benefit of learners and all those who support learners across Wales.

3.8 To help share thinking so that there is a clear approach going forward which is future fit.

3.9 At its conclusion, the MTR removed the previous expectation that local authorities work in partnership with Regional School Improvement Consortia. However, it did set an expectation that all local authorities would continue to work in partnership with at least one other LA, with single LA school improvement services being significantly discouraged by Welsh Government.

3.10 The MTR made recommendations for future school improvement models, and included several expectations:

- A change in culture so school leaders and practitioners feel more empowered and have a greater sense of collective responsibility to lead and develop a local school-led system in support of learners.
- Continued focus on sharing professional learning and practice, through collaboration between schools, beyond schools and between LAs so expertise is shared locally and nationally drawing on as wide a range of expertise as possible.
- More expertise and resource for schools to support each other to avoid taking capacity out of the system wherever possible.
- More transparency over funding with clarity about how much is going directly to schools and how much is being retained by local partnerships and/or LAs.
- A stronger focus on the core national priorities in everything that we do with a renewed focus on how any support makes a difference at a classroom level.
- A focus on reducing workload and burdens on schools and school leaders with clarity about expectations over any reporting locally and nationally.
- Proposals for school and local change will be developed through a process of co-design and co-construction between LAs and schools.
- Impactful and responsive professional learning to support practitioners, and clear development for school leaders and partners.

3.11 Furthermore, it provided guidance on what local partnership structures might look like in practice. This included expectations on schools to collaborate with other schools at both a local level horizontally (schools with the same age range) and vertically (schools with different age ranges), with the aim of building strong and supportive collaborative partnerships, and a focus on providing peer support and challenge for self-evaluation.

3.12 The MTR highlighted that a clear majority of Welsh authorities were in favour of exploring a move away from current regional arrangements to partnerships between LAs which would allow for more localised approaches. It was acknowledged in the report that some authorities have already moved away from a regional delivery.

3.13 In response to the review, the Education Directorates in each of the five local authorities have engaged with schools and the relevant stakeholders; leaders, governors and unions to seek their views.

3.14 In Monmouthshire, engagement activities focused on asking headteachers to share their views on the existing EAS model, specifically the school improvement model, support for schools in need of acute support, governor support, and professional learning opportunities. Headteachers were asked if there were elements that they felt could be delivered closer to the 'frontline'. The core of the request focused on three questions:

- How can school-to-school working best be supported at a local level?
- How can school-to-school collaboration and networking continue to be supported across local authorities and nationally?
- How school improvement should best be supported at a national level?

3.15 The Chief Officer, Children and Young People, attended every cluster (Abergavenny, Caldicot, Chepstow and Monmouth) to have face to face discussions about the nature of horizontal and vertical collaboration in each cluster area. The nature of the discussions focused on the ability of the two sectors (primary and secondary) to effectively provide support for school improvement that had sufficient challenge to ensure consistently high school performance. A key part of this was the ability to effectively challenge and hold to account. On balance, the conversations in Monmouthshire saw a clear value in closer cluster working and in developing this relationship to have greater alignment in curriculum planning and the alignment of school development planning. However, amongst primary sector schools there was a recognition that the relationships in cluster are predominately supportive and were likely to lack some of the harder challenge that is likely to be required to secure the improvements in school performance.

3.16 Amongst Monmouthshire's secondary schools there is an apparent appetite to look at more radical models of collaboration in the horizontal groupings. Throughout the past two years the four schools have established a closer working relationship and there appears to be an opportunity to consider what greater integration could look like in the future. Greater alignment of the curriculum offer, support for vulnerable learners, development of shared support structures are all areas that could be considered.

3.17 A majority of headteachers in Monmouthshire were content with the support and challenge they receive from their School Improvement Partners (SIPs) but for the minority there was not sufficient challenge and there had been a lack of consistency in SIPs. Broadly, the model where SIPs are mainly serving headteachers from across the region is a strong one, and, in addition, the model provides Monmouthshire's schools with an important additional funding stream (£49,700 this year).

3.18 Concerns were raised about some of the current quality assurance measures for SIPs and commented that there was too much variability in the support from SIPs, depending on who the school was allocated. There was also a desire from some Headteachers to see a more holistic offer of support from SIPs to include support in areas including Additional Learning Needs (ALN), attendance and management of behaviours that challenge. This greater alignment of school improvement alongside the development of inclusive practices is in full alignment with the ambitions of the Welsh Government.

3.19 However, at the most recent Headteacher's meeting there was a move against this. Heads were now stating that they valued the specific focus on school improvement and teaching and learning that their SIPs brought them. Nearly all headteachers conceptually liked the model of school-to-school support, however many headteachers felt this could be broadened to include more schools that also have good practice to share. The activities set out in the following paragraphs should allow our local schooling system to more effectively identify effective practice that can be shared.

3.20 In order to create an effective *Local Improvement Community* there are some developments that can be made in the new working arrangements to support and promote greater local

resilience and peer led school improvement activities. The first is that we will begin to use more Monmouthshire Headteachers to be school improvement partners in Monmouthshire schools. We have one pilot arrangement where a Headteacher from the south of the county is supporting a Headteacher in the north. The second is that we will seek to develop further peer working within clusters. In the past we have established 'triads' of schools, within clusters, to focus on specific aspects of school improvement and it is our intention to do this again. This will be more formalised and the schools, the authority and the regional service will identify and agree shared priorities for development. The third, and final, area of work is to look at cross-cluster working to focus on areas of mutual interest where schools across the county face challenges.

3.21 These additional developments will allow Monmouthshire to take an increasingly local approach while retaining the significant benefits of external challenge and brokered support.

3.22 The majority of Headteachers felt that the Governors' Support provided a good service. Generally, headteachers felt that the professional learning offer was appropriate and at times strong, however there was consensus that there was simply too much on offer at times and it would benefit from a greater focus on national and Monmouthshire's priorities.

3.23 In addition to engagement activities with headteachers, there have also been several discussions with the directors of the EAS. These discussions have helped Directors across the 5 authorities to shape proposed models for a new school improvement partnership. All Authorities are required to submit an outline of their proposed plans to the Welsh Government National Coherence Group by 31st October 2024.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

4.1 The impact of this decision has been considered through the authority's Integrated Impact Assessment. This can be found at Appendix 1. The assessment concludes that this direction of travel will ensure that the impact of the service continues to be positive and does not have any unintended consequences on those with protected characteristics, promotes the Welsh Language and supports the objectives and ways of working of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

5.1 In considering the future three options were considered:

Option 1

5.2 Remain in a static position with EAS continuing to provide a service to Monmouthshire and other authorities across the region. This would include the governance arrangement remaining static.

- Governance Issues remaining static (Company Board)
- Common regional protocols and processes across all local authorities
- SIPs for Monmouthshire Schools from surrounding local authorities or core SIPs
- Principal SIP from central EAS
- Governors Support Service retained
- Regional Professional Learning offer to continue
- Schools to School Support to continue
- Cluster focus to remain in place
- Regional Headteacher Strategy Group to be led by EAS

Strengths:

- The current model provides many features in common with revised national school improvement guidance.
- There has been a strengthening of the position of Monmouthshire's schools. At the end of the last inspection cycle there were no schools in a statutory category
- There are effective relationships with Monmouthshire's dedicated Principal School Improvement Partner and other members of the EAS leadership team.
- The EAS has always ensured that their practice is reflective of national priorities and educational research and has adapted over time in line with regional requests. There is a good track record of positive change.
- This secures ongoing delegation of funding to schools.

Risks:

- Stakeholder feedback shows a strong preference to move away from the Company Board model and move to a partnership model.
- Not all local authorities currently in the model may remain – this may lead to financial efficiencies needing to be made which may weaken the current EAS staffing structure and resources available for other LA partners.
- MTR recommendations link to bespoke systems and processes to support local issues and ongoing dialogue and collaboration with LAs.
- Headteacher feedback shows that they want changes to the current model, including changes to the professional development offer.

Option 2

5.3 Remaining in a school improvement partnership with EAS staffing. Features of this include:

- The Company is disassembled to create an LA Partnership.
- The Partnership continues to employ current EAS staffing (as much as possible and being mindful of the potential impact if one LA does leave.)
- Overtime further changes are made to ensure school improvement services reflect changing times, educational research, national school improvement and local need.
- Schools delegated funding is secured to allow headteachers to continue to act as SIPs and schools to act as leaders for school improvement themes (Partner Schools).
- Cluster working reinforced.
- Quality assurance processes are developed with school leaders (at all levels) to maximise opportunities to become Partner Schools.
- A mixed economy of core / casual SIPS is in place with greater opportunities for local authorities to directly employ school improvement staff when vacancies and funding allows.

Opportunities:

- A local authority approach may reduce some bureaucracy for the EAS and local authorities.
- Local authorities are likely to have more autonomy over joint school improvement services.
- Working to change and improve over time has less risk of destabilising school improvement and will help to retain high quality staff currently working within the system.
- Schools delegated funding can remain secure.
- Monmouthshire can maximise their income generation for Partner School work.
- Secondary schools have a greater opportunity to work collaboratively and reduce duplication and better quality assure provision for subject specific support.
- Working in a local context can be highly beneficial to understanding Monmouthshire communities, learners, and their similarities.
- Developmental opportunities for school and LA staff are maximised and succession planning is strengthened.
- Monmouthshire leaders will feel an improved sense of collaboration and empowerment and ownership around school improvement activities.
- Better alignment between the school improvement service and advisory staff linked to attendance, GEMS, ALN, Inclusion and Early Years, to provide seamless support to school.

Risks:

- The disassembling of the Company Board is uncharted territory which requires its own considerations.
- This may create a time of uncertainty for EAS staff and schools in receipt of support.
- Potential loss of staff expertise, through EAS staff seeking work elsewhere, at a time of uncertainty.
- Changes in partnership over time may result in destabilisation of a partnership staffing structure over time.

Option 3

5.4 Monmouthshire reverts to a local authority led school improvement serviced and offers to collaborate with other local authority partners on a buy back basis. Some services could be purchased from other local authorities e.g. governor support. The features of this include:

- All school improvement is designed by Monmouthshire and is provided by a Monmouthshire core staffing structure. This would need to include:
 - A Principal School Improvement Adviser (supervision of School Improvement Partners / Professional Development Reviews, Quality Assurance).
 - Head of Governor Support (Professional Development Reviews, Quality Assurance, professional learning of clerks and Governing Bodies, legal advice and reports, bespoke coaching of Governing Bodies, expertise in statutory committees) a Senior Officer and /or a Statutory GB Officer and access to administration support.
 - Sufficient number of clerks to governing bodies to cover both ordinary and statutory committees.

- At least 2 core SIPs to ensure coverage of phase, language and specialism, also to ensure the maintenance of the universal, targeted and intensive support needs overtime.
 - Professional Learning Lead 4 x advisory teachers (bilingual and phase specific service) to lead and manage all aspects of curriculum, teaching and leadership requirements to include: Numeracy, Digital, Literacy, Curriculum for Wales, Welsh 1st and 2nd language, pupil deprivation and wellbeing, PL for all practitioners (e.g. TAs, NQTs), SACRE and RVE, Humanities, Science and Technology.
 - 1 Non-Maintained Nursery Setting Lead and Early Years in schools.
 - Sufficient number of Advisory Teachers for Non-Maintained Nursery settings, to ensure coverage of language and the maintenance of the universal, targeted and intensive support needs overtime.
- The costs associated with an in-house structure would be approximately £1.3m. With full retention of current core contribution and all of eligible Local Authority Education Grant (LAEG) Monmouthshire has approximately £1.3m available. However, this would also see a loss of funding of £792,946 to schools.
 - Governance arrangements link to current local authority systems e.g. Cabinet Member, Scrutiny and Cabinet Reporting.
 - A Joint Monmouthshire Headteacher's Group would remain in place.
 - Core staff have multi-dimensional roles to facilitate the LEAG School Improvement Grant T&C's

Opportunities:

- Staff from the EAS may be able to move to Monmouthshire through the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of employment) process (TUPE).
- Improved alignment between the school improvement staff and advisory staff linked to attendance, GEMS, ALN, Inclusion and Early Years, to provide seamless support to school.
- Monmouthshire would have autonomy over school improvement processes and could be more agile and responsive to local demand.

Risks:

- Financial penalties linked to disassembling a regional partnership.
- The cost of model 3 is beyond the current funding available – this would reduce schools delegated funding.
- Council staffing has also reduced over time. Commencing with limited staffing presents a risk for future capacity.
- Staff absence could not be covered which may reduce support for schools at times.
- Other LA's buying in a service can choose to pull out at any time which can destabilise budgets and resources.
- Prior advertising of school improvement staff demonstrates that there is sparsity of professionals. Headteachers are reluctant to leave their posts. Local authority posts have less favourable pay, terms and conditions. Secondment arrangements are unaffordable.
- Buying in one element of a shared service does not maximise opportunities for efficiency

- Providing services for other local authorities can reduce a local authorities ability to focus as report writing and quality assurance for other local authorities is time consuming.
- Providing a service for another local authority can deplete resources quickly for example a LA moving into Special Measures would need a significant amount of resource which maybe too challenging to find.
- Monmouthshire may be responsible for managing and quality assuring HT SIPs outside of the authority.

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

6.1 The criteria applied to the three options above considered each option's suitability, feasibility and acceptability. On the basis of this evaluative structure, it is recommended that option two, the reform of the existing structure is taken forward.

7. REASONS:

7.1 This option allows the continued benefits of deep and effective collaboration with other local authorities whilst also allowing the aims and ambitions of the middle tier review to be realised. Through more ambitious local collaboration, the creation of a *Local Improvement Community* will be a key focus for the authority's work in the coming period. Furthermore, option two does not present the financial and organisational risks that option three does. There would be a loss of financial income to schools across Monmouthshire and the Authority would need to take on a greater number of staff to fulfil its statutory obligations. These staff would be grant funded and this is an inherent risk in the Learning, Skills and Economy directorate with c. 50% of staff already grant funded.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

8.1 In March 2024 Welsh Government reassigned school improvement grants to Local Authorities. The EAS have shared information with the 5 LAs to support understanding around the alignment between direct grants awarded to schools and the costs of the EAS to provide their statutory functions, on behalf of LAs.

8.2 Welsh Government grants for school improvement totalled £8,402,614 over 4 strands – Standards, Reform, Cymraeg 2050, and Equity. A proportion of these grants are linked to local authority, central education services including Elective Home Education and ALN implementation (£1,141,829) are delegated directly to schools, as per the terms and conditions of the grant, for example, Late Immersion Grants LEAG Equity.

8.3 £16,557,862 is passported directly to schools and non-maintained settings for areas including Pupil Deprivation and Curriculum.

8.4 The remaining £1,053,950 is added to the LAs annual core contribution of £327,090. This provides a total of £1,381,040 for the EAS to facilitate a school improvement function.

8.5 The current EAS model maximises efficiencies, flexibility and economies of scale Monmouthshire could not afford to pay for these services on their own. Entering into a new partnership agreement will enable these efficiencies to continue to be maximised. However, economies of scale will be reduced if one or more LAs decide to not continue to work in partnership. Cabinet Paper Middle Tier Review Page 9 of 10

8.6 Staffing and structure costs associated with Option 3 would result in this option raising a significant cost pressure for the Local Authority, and it is unlikely that this model could be sustained over a period of time.

8.7 There may be financial penalties linked to disassembling a regional partnership.

9. **CONSULTEES:**

Monmouthshire Headteachers

Learning, Skills and Economy Directorate Management Team

Senior Leadership Team

Cabinet Member

10. **BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

1. The July 2023 Written Statement announcing the review is accessible via the following link:
2. [Written Statement: School improvement: the role and responsibilities of education partners \(12 July 2023\) | GOV.WALES](#)
3. The Original terms of reference for the review stage can be accessed via the following link:
4. [Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements: terms of reference | GOV.WALES](#)
5. In December 2023 the review team updated the then Minister for Education on their progress and the key emerging themes and findings. The letter to the then Minister is attached below
6. [*Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements: letter to the minister | GOV.WALES](#)
7. Following this, the then Minister agreed that the next stage of the review's work would focus on the detailed design and co-construction of revised school improvement arrangements. This was announced in a Written Statement, accompanied by publishing advice from the review team, on 31 January 2024.
8. [Written Statement: The next stage in the review of school improvement - the roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales \(31 January 2024\) | GOV.WALES.](#)
9. On 17 October 2024, a Written Statement from the Cabinet Secretary provided an update national arrangements to support school improvement following the [review](#).
10. [Written Statement: School improvement \(17 October 2024\) | GOV.WALES](#)

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