

Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee
13th September 2023

Report Title:	Secondary Schools Improvement Strategy
Lead Officer:	Cressy Murphy

Key Issues in the report highlighted by Lead Officer

Progress made in realising the aims of the Secondary School Improvement Strategy has been slow and now needs to gain in pace with the Secondary School Improvement Team working closely with schools in line with the Estyn visit improvement plan. This will include: Improving relationships with Headteachers, Improvements to Teaching and Learning and Improvements in the reporting systems.

Key Feeders (tick all that apply)

Strategic Risk		Cabinet Work Plan	
Director / Head of Service Key Issue		External / Internal Inspection	
Existing Commitment / Annual Report	X	Performance / Finance Issue	
Suggestion from Public		Referral from Council / Committee	
Corporate Improvement Plan		Impacting Public / other services	
Service Integrated Business Plan			
Suggestion from Members			
Partnerships			

Scrutiny Impact (tick all that apply)

Policy Review		Performance	
Informing Policy Development		Evidence Gathering	
Risk		Corporate Improvement Plan	
Service Integrated Business Plan		Partnerships	
Pre-Decision Scrutiny		Finance / Budget	

Other (please specify)

Suggested scrutiny activity - Committee's Role:

To be aware of the progress made in realising the Secondary School Improvement Strategy and to scrutinise the effectiveness of the team working with the secondary schools across Powys. To scrutinise how effectively the schools are responding to the challenge and support provided by the team.

On what specific elements of the report would scrutiny comment add value

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee
Date

Report Author:	County Councillor Pete Roberts Portfolio Holder for a Learning Powys
Lead Officer:	Cressy Murphy
Report Title:	Secondary Schools Improvement Strategy
Report For:	Information and Discussion

1. Purpose

The purpose of the report is to provide the Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the work undertaken by Schools Service and schools, in collaboration with key partners to support the implementation of the Secondary School Improvement Strategy

2. Background

2.1 The Secondary School Improvement Strategy (SSIS) was developed in February 2021 as a key stepping-stone to support the ambitious vision for Powys. An integral part of the SSIS, in line with Education in Wales: Our National Mission, is to encourage and promote collaboration between secondary schools to share good practice, innovate and improve in order to achieve the highest possible standards and move towards becoming a high achieving, self-improving LA.

2.2 The implementation of the SSIS will drive sustainable school improvement, guided by effective self-evaluation and improvement planning, and provide all school leaders with the necessary support to improve practice. This will eventually lead to a network of excellent schools, working within a collaborative environment, to spread excellence across the secondary sector. In addition, the emphasis placed on continuous school improvement, sharing and learning from good practice, at whole school and departmental level, in relation to learning and teaching, leadership and the curriculum and its implementation will address the seven dimensions for schools as learning organisations (SLO).

2.3 The SSIS noted that the focus in the short term would be

- ensuring consistency in the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning
- improving learning and teaching
- improving literacy and numeracy standards across secondary schools
- implementing an agreed strategy to improve leadership development, professional learning and to develop school to school collaboration.

2.4 The implementation of the SSIS was hindered by the Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdowns and restrictions limited the amount of time that officers and consultants could visit schools and work alongside leaders and also changed the immediate focus of the school support required. The challenges faced by secondary schools during this time resulted in the majority of time and energy being focussed on managing the day-to-day challenges, detracting the focus from their long-term strategic aims. One positive impact that emerged as a result of the pandemic is the use of digital technology to access Professional Learning (PL) activities.

2.5 The decommissioning of ERW also stalled progress against the recommendations in the SSIS, and in addition, the dependency on external consultants in the design and delivery of professional learning events and in developing school-to-school collaborations had some effect on the implementation of the SSIS in that it has limited SIAs' capacity to ensure the necessary follow-up and evaluate the effect of these initiatives on school improvement.

- 2.6 Following the demise of ERW, and the significant challenge that the LA had faced in recruiting secondary Challenge Advisers and a Secondary School Improvement Manager a secondary school improvement team consisting of a Secondary School Improvement Manager (SSIM) and five subject specialist advisers were appointed and took up post in September 2022.
- 2.7 The need to establish new methods of working and develop a baseline of provision and standards in secondary schools led to an element of plateauing in the support and challenge provided in the initial stages of the team's work which was identified in the recent Estyn visit.
- 2.8 The initial focus of the team has been on establishing a strong understanding of the strengths and areas for development for individual schools, on developing leadership practice with a strong emphasis on the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning and on developing literacy and numeracy skills of learners across Powys secondary schools.
- 2.9 This work has placed the team (and thus the LA) in a suitable position to evaluate progress against the SSIS priorities and further develop the support provided to ensure a bespoke and targeted approach to have a positive impact in schools. In addition, the SSIM (Secondary school improvement manager) has a clear picture of the changes required to further develop the work of the team, improve the support and challenge provided, ensure consistency across the team and develop the system to track the effect of the advisers' work.

3. Priority 1: Ensuring consistency in the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning

- 3.1 The secondary team provided training, available to all Headteachers on the new school improvement guidance and development plan writing. All schools received feedback on their school development plans and were supported and challenged to improve them in line with the new guidance through 'Support and Challenge meetings'. As a result of this the majority of schools improved their development plans, with more focused priority areas informed by first hand evidence.
- 3.2 All schools have received support from school improvement advisers (SIAs) to develop their approaches to self-evaluation. By January 2023 schools had developed a calendar of appropriate activities based on gathering first hand evidence of learning which led to identification of broad areas of strength and areas to improve. There are however, too many cases where school leaders do not identify the specific features of learning that require development precisely enough, and not all schools triangulate the evidence between different monitoring activities well enough. There has been an over-reliance on the use of examination data to provide information on the progress that learners are making in lessons and over time, which is not in line with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales.
- 3.3 School improvement advisers and subject advisers have worked alongside school leaders to model effective approaches to learner centred self-evaluation processes. This has included doing joint lesson observation, learning walks, looking at work and listening to learners followed by professional dialogue about the findings. This work, alongside the work of the Support and Challenge meetings, has seen a number of schools make significant progress in their understanding of learner centred evaluation. This work is still in its initial stages, and therefore improving self-evaluation and improvement planning processes remains an important focus for the LA.

4. Priority 2: Improving teaching and learning

4.1 In January 2023 the secondary team worked closely with schools to evaluate standards of learning and teaching across Powys secondary and all-age schools. The findings from these visits have allowed the team to begin to develop suitable support for the schools. Strengths across Powys include that in nearly all cases there are positive relationships between learners and adults in schools. Learners listen carefully to input from teachers, and are courteous and polite to adults and their peers. Most teachers have strong subject knowledge, and many give clear explanations and support learners to build on their prior knowledge successfully. However, in too many cases teachers have low expectations of what the learners are capable of achieving, the pace of learning is too slow and teachers over direct the learning. As a result far too many learners in Powys do not make the progress over time that they are capable of. Improving teaching and learning experiences will continue to be a priority for the service.

4.2 The secondary team are developing links with the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) and PL Team to provide a variety of PL opportunities linked to learning and teaching and supporting clusters with the development of CfW through targeted, staggered INSET sessions to ensure all PCC officers can support each cluster and provide bespoke guidance. The feedback from the majority of clusters has been positive and they have found the CfW INSET PL sessions helpful in developing a shared understanding of progression in learning, which is a mandatory expectation for all schools and clusters.

4.3 In cases where schools have requested the support, the secondary subject advisers have worked closely with middle leaders and teachers in schools to build on the work undertaken in the Cluster INSETs and support practitioners to develop teaching practice in line with the twelve pedagogical principles of Curriculum for Wales. There has been positive feedback in response to the work of the subject advisers, with many Headteachers stating that the support was 'extremely useful'.

4.4 The OLEVI Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP) has been offered to nearly all clusters of schools. Six secondary school clusters have taken part in the OTP, with at least one teacher from these schools attending the training. One of the secondary schools involved has stated that the OTP has had a significant impact on improving learning and teaching across the school. The impact of the OTP training on developing whole school approaches to pedagogy has been variable. Where it has been effective, schools have shared the pedagogy with all teaching staff and developed a whole school approach which underpins their understanding of pedagogy and has given staff the confidence to try new techniques. These staff have used the questioning techniques to draw out higher level responses from learners, especially impacting on the development of MAT learners. However, in a few schools, the OTP techniques have not been shared across the whole school and therefore it is not used consistently across classes and is having a limited impact on improving pedagogy.

4.5 Eight facilitators from across Powys have been trained as OLEVI trainers, and they facilitated their first OTP programme in autumn 2022. This programme will be developed into the new academic year and offered to all secondary and all-age schools. Training from the OLEVI trainers will be followed up by support from the school improvement advisers to ensure the approaches are embedded across the school and impact all practitioners.

5. Priority 3: improving literacy and numeracy standards across secondary schools

5.1 Following the return to school after the lockdowns, regression was seen in learners' key skills, resilience and social and emotional skills. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) 2022 report states that overall, "the evidence shows that Covid-related disruption has caused learning loss in both maths and reading, though there is some variability in different studies' findings on which subject has been more affected." Most evidence shows that by summer 2021, learners had not yet recovered from the learning they had lost during 2020 and 2021 in both maths and reading and in

fact a recent study (DfE, 2022) found that in secondary reading, learning losses have increased since the end of the 2021 summer term. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Welsh medium literacy has also been captured and the July 2021 WG report evidences the significant impact upon the Welsh medium provision particularly the learners who lived in non-Welsh speaking households during the lockdowns.

Moving forward it is essential that practitioners focus on the identification of the gaps in learning and provide effective formative feedback to close the learning gap. It has been argued by some researchers that now is not the time for marks, levels, or grades but a greater focus in building confidence in our learners by focusing on the key skills which will act as a springboard to all learning.

5.3 In 2021-22 all secondary schools were given the opportunity to participate in the LA's "reading behaviours" programme with the expectation that this would improve reading standards across the ability spectrum and in individual subjects across all schools. Progress in relation to literacy and numeracy and in particular the impact of the reading behaviour programme was the subject of the LA's summer monitoring visits in 2022. The overall evaluation was that less progress had been made than expected. The following actions formed part of the overall recommendations:

- Literacy/numeracy development plans should include key, measurable targets for ensuring individual subject contributions to literacy/numeracy across the curriculum, and all schools should identify a leader(s) responsible for developing the provision for literacy and numeracy skills across the school.
- Ensuring that literacy/numeracy rich tasks are appropriate and sufficiently challenging to meet the needs of all learners and Curriculum for Wales expectations.
- Professional learning programme needed for staff to develop expertise in oracy (speaking and listening), embed reading behaviours as an essential part of classroom practice and establish techniques to improve learners writing across the curriculum.
- Professional learning programme for staff to develop expertise in developing numeracy across the curriculum.
- Establish suitable systems to evaluate literacy/numeracy standards across the school that include lesson observation, book scrutiny, learning walks, teacher and learner voice.
- Ensure that all practitioners in the school know and understand what good practice in literacy/numeracy across the curriculum looks like.

5.4 Training on the planning for the effective development of learners' numeracy skills has been delivered to all schools during 2022-23. All schools have engaged positively with the training and have worked with subject advisers to develop approaches to numeracy in individual subject areas. Most schools have now appointed dedicated 'numeracy coordinators' whose role it is to develop numeracy across the curriculum. From the evidence seen on school visits there has been strong progress in schools' approaches to the evaluation of numeracy, and improvements have been noted in planning for developing numeracy. Standardised numeracy methods have been agreed and shared with staff in many schools and the mapping of numeracy opportunities across the curriculum has begun in many schools. Many schools have focussed on improving learners' ability to synthesise and present information through the use of graphs, an area which has been highlighted by Estyn as in need of improvement across Wales. Schools have worked with subject advisers to develop the use of graphs in different subjects across the curriculum. Where requested officers have provided training and support in effective intervention strategies for improving numeracy skills, including through the medium of Welsh. One school that received the training has reported an increase in confidence and their fluency with number operations.

5.5 Schools are beginning to improve their provision for developing literacy across the curriculum based on the needs of their learners. Officers have enabled the sharing of good practice through network meetings and have shared strategies and exemplars, for example spelling and oracy strategies, explicit vocabulary instruction and Talk for Writing. A literacy audit tool has been shared with all schools, and schools have been supported to assess literacy provision and develop their literacy improvement plans. Subject advisers have built on this by working directly with schools to

demonstrate how these approaches can be used in practice. In addition to this the LA have brokered 'Voice 21 training' for all secondary and all-age schools. This is a comprehensive training and follow up programme to support schools to develop and implement outstanding provision for the development of oracy across the school. This training will begin in autumn 2023.

5.6 Research on the instruction of literacy with language is a comprehensive Welsh literacy intervention package focussed on reading in years 3 to 6 and endorsed by Welsh Government. All all-age schools have received training in this approach and will implement the interventions from September 2023. This work will improve the reading skills of learners in Welsh and English medium schools and across clusters so that they are able to progress their learning more rapidly in the secondary phase.

5.7 Literacy and numeracy networks have been established, and well attended by schools. These networks allow identified best practice in literacy and numeracy to be shared, and support collaborative working between as well as within schools. Training has been provided to new literacy and numeracy coordinators in understanding and being effective in their role, training has also been provided to newly qualified teachers and non-specialist teachers. Subject advisers have worked closely with schools to identify the precise areas of literacy and numeracy that they need to develop in each subject area and have supported them to develop subject specific approaches to literacy and numeracy through joint planning, modelling and professional learning opportunities. This has led to an increased understanding of what good practice in literacy and numeracy across the curriculum looks like.

6. Implementing an agreed strategy to improve leadership development, professional learning and to develop school to school collaboration

6.1 During the pandemic the LA and schools worked closely to begin a leadership development programme and increase school to school collaboration. This was well-received by schools however, the impact of these two programmes was affected by

- the pandemic and in particular its effect on the time and energy available for professional learning
- an overly full professional learning programme for Headteachers and senior leaders that did not allow sufficient time at school level to share and then implement some of the key messages presented in the sessions
- a minority of individual sessions were not directly linked to LA and school priorities
- the lack of a strategic approach when deciding on school-to-school collaborative groups
- LA and school improvement advisers not fully involved in the sessions and as a result were not in a position to follow up on the learning in schools

6.2 Since September 2022 SIAs have worked closely with school leaders in a coaching and mentoring capacity with a focus on a re-engaging with strategic thinking and planning in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples include where school improvement advisers have supported leaders to realise a vision for improving teaching and learning experiences and embed that culture across the school, there has been leadership support for curriculum planning and development, and for effective line management and performance management. Feedback from headteachers and school leaders has been positive, with nearly all leaders describing the support they have received as 'extremely useful' or 'somewhat useful'.

6.3 Acting and newly appointed Headteachers have been assigned a mentor, and for those who have worked in Powys previously that mentor has been from out of county in order to bring an external perspective. This has been well-received and one headteacher stated that the choice

of mentor being tailored to their needs has been extremely beneficial. Recruitment of strong school leaders in the secondary sector has also been improved and is already having a positive impact on standards and provision.

6.4 Schools have been signposted to the most appropriate national leadership development programmes by LA officers, including the national senior leadership development programme, the middle leadership development programme and the NPQH qualification. Attendance from secondary practitioners at these programmes has declined over the 2022-23 academic year, and this has largely been due to pressures in schools around staffing and cover and the level of commitment necessary to attend. Where leaders have attended these programmes there has been a positive impact on leadership practice, and all leaders attending have been able to demonstrate their impact on the school development plan.

7. Wellbeing

7.1 In addition to the above, secondary schools have reported an increased level of challenge in relation to promoting good levels attendance, behaviour and a positive and resilient attitude to learning. As these aspects have a direct impact on teaching and learning and on creating the conditions for individual learners and teachers to succeed then improving attendance, inclusion and attitudes to learning of secondary age learners has been added to the priorities for the SSIS.

7.2 All schools receive support from a dedicated Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) to work with them to develop approaches to improving attendance and relationships with learners and their families. Where the need for further support for wellbeing and attendance has been identified we have provided additional bespoke support through school improvement advisers. This support has resulted in an increase in attendance across the county, and attendance in Powys remains well above the Welsh national average.

8. Conclusions and next steps

8.1 The evaluation of the SSIS priorities has shown that progress was not in line with expectations during the academic year 2021-22. As referred to previously this can be largely attributed to the impact of the pandemic, including schools being focussed on day-to-day challenges which detracted from the focus on strategic planning. In addition, there have been recruitment challenges within the service.

8.2 Early in the academic year 2022-23 two schools received Estyn monitoring visits and as a result were placed into 'Special Measures'. In addition, one school received a core inspection and was placed into 'Estyn review'. This has placed additional pressure on the new team due to the need to provide intense support for those schools. Five secondary or all-age schools are due inspection in 2023-24.

8.3 Whilst progress was initially slow in 2022-23 due to the induction of a whole new team as has been identified by Estyn in their recent visit, the need to establish a baseline across the county, progress against the priorities has increased at a steady rate through the rest of the academic year. Improvements have been seen in self-evaluation and improvement planning, and in the planning for the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, the LA now have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for development of individual schools, and are able to tailor support to their specific needs. This is beginning to ensure that support is more focussed and precise, which leads to greater and more sustainable impact.

8.4 Support for the development of Welsh language in secondary schools is an area for development for the service. There is not currently a Welsh speaking officer in the secondary school improvement team due to challenges with recruitment. The SSIM has brokered Welsh medium support for schools through the MWEP, external consultants and by working closely with the primary improvement team however, going forward the need for a dedicated Welsh speaking school improvement adviser should be considered.

8.5 As a result of the findings in this report the SSIS has been revised and updated. The short-term priorities for the revised SSIS are listed below:

1. Improving the quality of learning and teaching experiences across Powys secondary and all-age schools.
2. Improving self-evaluation and improvement planning processes in secondary and all-age schools.
3. Improving standards in literacy and numeracy for learners in secondary and all-age schools.
4. Improving attendance, inclusion and attitudes to learning of secondary age learners.
5. Implementing an agreed strategy to strengthen leadership at all levels and develop school-to-school collaboration.

8.6 Priority 1 improving the quality of learning and teaching experiences will always be the main focus of the service, and the following four priorities will all build towards and support the realisation of priority 1.

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