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Assessing the contribution of Schools Challenge Cymru to outcomes achieved by Pathways to Success schools

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Assessing the contribution of Schools Challenge Cymru to outcomes achieved by Pathways to Success schools

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Glossary

AIB	Accelerated Improvement Board
CA	Challenge Adviser
Consortia	Regional Education Consortia
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
L2I	Level 2 Inclusive is 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent, including a GCSE grade A*-C in Mathematics and either English or Welsh first language
LA	Local Authority
PtS	Pathways to Success schools
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SCC	Schools Challenge Cymru
National Tests	National Reading and Numeracy Tests
School cluster	A group of schools in which there is evidence of partnership-working between primary and secondary schools
SDP	School Development Plan (in some schools this is referred to as a School Improvement Plan)
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

Executive Summary

1. This report presents the findings of research undertaken by SQW on behalf of the Welsh Government as part of the independent evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC). This report focusses on the contribution of SCC in improving the performance of Pathways to Success (PtS) schools, who benefitted from a proportion of the SCC funding.

2. Schools Challenge Cymru and PtS ran from 2014/15 to 2016/17 (three academic years). The findings in this report are drawn from detailed fieldwork undertaken in the PtS schools from May to July 2016 (i.e. the second year) and build on the research undertaken in the first year of SCC (i.e. May to July 2015). Therefore, the evaluation does not cover the third and final year of PtS.

3. Alongside documentary evidence, the report draws on in-depth interviews with Challenge Advisers, staff in Local Authorities and Regional Consortia, the senior leadership teams (SLT) and staff of all 39 PtS schools, their cluster primary schools and secondary partner schools. It also includes insights from exploratory pilot surveys conducted with pupils in Years 6, 7 and 9 in 2014/15 and in Years 7, 8 and 10 in 2015/16.

About Pathways to Success

4. Launched in June 2014 and rolled out to schools in September 2014, SCC represented a concerted effort by the Welsh Government to respond to variability in the performance of different schools across Wales in supporting the development of their pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In total, up to £40 million was made available to support the delivery of SCC during the first two years of the programme. A proportion of the resources were made available to 40 **Pathways to Success** (PtS) schools (two of which subsequently merged) and their wider clusters (each one commonly comprising of its feeder primary schools), and funding was made available to the four Regional Education Consortia to help build capacity within the wider education system.

5. Drawing on learning from previous initiatives of this type, such as the London and Greater Manchester Challenges, PtS schools have been encouraged, through the programme, to reflect on the quality of their leadership and management, teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of their work with the wider community. By making improvements in these areas, it was hoped that SCC would support an improvement in pupil learning outcomes in PtS schools, as well as generating lessons from these developments to help strengthen the capacity of the whole education system to improve itself.

6. In order to help them overcome their barriers to improvement, PtS schools have been able to access a number of different types of support. Key elements have included:

- support from a named **Schools Challenge Cymru Adviser** to help Senior Leaders in PtS schools identify approaches by which to overcome their barriers to improvement
- the opportunity to apply for **additional funding** from the Welsh Government to support the implementation of the school improvement strategy
- support from an **Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB)**
- the opportunity to develop a **(Single) School Development Plan**.

School improvement approaches adopted by PtS schools

7. Each of the PtS schools faced challenges in relation to their levels of deprivation or attainment compared to the national average. A synthesis of the evidence from the evaluation in 2014/15 concluded that the rationale for inclusion as a PtS school varied that while the approaches adopted by PtS schools were largely informed by their trajectory prior to their inclusion in SCC, they were also informed by the performance of their school leaders. Based on this analysis, the evaluation team suggested three contextual groupings for PtS approaches:

- **Group A:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared to have been **diminishing** prior to engagement with SCC and who were at risk of further decline. **Eight** PtS schools were identified as Group A schools.
- **Group B:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared **stable** prior to engagement with SCC but were considered in need of improvement. **Sixteen** PtS schools were assessed as typifying Group B schools.
- **Group C:** Schools in which the quality of provision had **started to improve** prior to engagement with SCC. **Fourteen** PtS schools were best described as in this group.

8. By 2015/16, there was evidence of progress in the ways that all PtS schools approached and implemented school improvement strategies and particularly in **improving teacher quality**. In summary:

- every PtS school (whether Group A, B or C) now reported a programme of school improvement activities focused on improving teacher quality, reflecting:
  - the increased priority interviewees attached to this area
  - greater confidence amongst senior leaders in being able to implement school-improvement activities
- there was a greater emphasis than in 2014/15 on building the capacity of individual teachers already working in PtS schools, rather than on bringing in new staff
- ways of working with partner schools had improved, with greater emphasis on joint CPD programmes and developing shared solutions to the challenges faced by both schools
- the early emphasis on the need to improve the quality of self-evaluation and school development planning was less evident as such systems became established
- there was a growing emphasis on improving leadership and management quality, with many schools investing more in the development of middle leaders to ensure that effective practices were cascaded down the school.

The performance of PtS schools

9. An analysis of the performance data for PtS schools at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 suggests that considering the predicted and actual outcomes for schools alongside others with similar characteristics and levels of prior attainment is more helpful in assessing their relative performance than a comparison with all schools. While the PtS schools generally performed below the Welsh average in core subjects, each of the PtS schools had made **academic progress** in the two years since the implementation of SCC.

- Schools in Group A (where the quality of provision appeared to have been diminishing prior to engagement with SCC) and Group C (where the quality of provision had started to improve prior to engagement with SCC) made more and faster progress than might have been predicted, given their pupil profile.
- Schools in Group B (those in which the quality of provision appeared stable prior to engagement with SCC) made the level of progress that would have been predicted, given their pupil profile.

10. PtS schools made less initial progress in improving **attendance**, than would have been predicted, particularly in 2014/15. However, during 2015/16:

    - Schools in Group A and Group C made slightly more progress than would have been forecast, given the characteristics of their pupils
    - Schools in Group B still appear to have struggled, with lower levels of attendance than might have been expected, even without the PtS intervention.

11. External stakeholders thought that improvements had been made to the quality of leadership and management in around four-fifths of all PtS schools (32 schools). Where such improvements were not reported, schools were commonly characterised by recent changes within the senior leadership team. The new leadership in these schools were thought to have the potential to deliver the improvements required, but interviewees thought it would take time before they became apparent.

12. Interviewees in most PtS schools believed that gains had been made in improving the quality of self-evaluation. In most cases, such improvements were attributed to an improvement in the confidence of leaders to make decisions around school improvement.

The contribution of programme level guidance

13. In October 2014, the Welsh Government introduced new guidance governing the development of **School Development Plans** (SDP) and by 2015/16, all of the PtS schools had an SDP in place. However, it was notable that, while interviewees considered that their plan was compliant with the guidance, they expressed concern about their ability to resource a plan over a three-year cycle when grant funding was paid out on an annual basis.

14. Over the course of SCC, PtS schools have been encouraged to improve the quality of **collaborative activity within their school cluster** (commonly taken to comprise of local/feeder primary schools.

    - By 2016, the number of PtS schools actively involved in work with their cluster had increased from just over two-thirds in 2015 to nearly all (over four-fifths).
    - In schools with a history of working with their cluster prior to SCC, the quality and quantity of collaborative work had increased over the last year. This included an increasing emphasis on approaches designed to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.

- Peer-to-peer support networks had been established in just under half of the schools involved in **cluster collaborative activity**. These networks commonly included a subject specialist from a PtS school and two primary practitioners from different cluster schools. Most networks tended to be subject specific (English and/or Welsh, maths or science) and had focussed on a specific theme (such as book marking).

15. PtS schools have also been encouraged, where appropriate, to **collaborate with other secondary schools** (both with schools located in Wales and elsewhere).

- The proportion of schools that appeared to be working with secondary partners increased from around three-fifths to around four-fifths. In many cases, the driving force behind the identification of appropriate partners was a school's Adviser.

- There was wide variability in the aims of **partnership working** and the informal manner in which much of this work was conducted meant that there was limited evidence, at this stage, of the benefits of this work in helping PtS schools to achieve their school improvement objectives

The contribution of Challenge Advisers

16. Advisers exercised a significant amount of discretion in terms of how they engaged with their school(s). They used this discretion to identify the key challenges holding back a school's performance and then took action to tackle these problems.

17. Where the capacity of the existing Senior Leadership team was identified as the main barrier to improvement, Advisers had taken on a range of roles to stabilise the school, sometimes beyond what would have been anticipated of an external 'adviser'

18. As schools improved, Advisers changed their approach, becoming more of a critical friend and focusing more on activities to help improve the quality of teaching and learning and on improving self-evaluation, particularly through the better collection and management of data in the school.

19. In the schools that made clear progress over the two years, Advisers broadened the range of their work to include both internal activities (concentrating work with departments seen as less successful or effective) and external activities with clusters or partnership schools.

20. In summary, Advisers worked more in partnership with better performing schools and were more directive with schools that were struggling.

21. Many PtS schools reported favourably on the value of their Adviser in supporting an improvement in school performance. Most expressed some reservations, however, as to how the value of the Adviser could be disaggregated from other factors at work within and beyond the school.

22. In some of the more challenged schools, the presence of the Adviser was said to have been a **source of stability and support**. Where leadership was receptive to improvement, the Adviser had greater opportunity to help the school identify its main challenges and design appropriate interventions.

23. The strength of the relationship between the Adviser and the Headteacher was central. In the rare cases where the Adviser and Headteacher had not developed a good relationship, this had a negative impact on the Adviser's ability to influence school improvement.

The contribution of Accelerated Improvement Boards (AIBs)

24. Perceptions of the role and value AIBs varied, although there was broad consensus across a wide range of interviewees and schools regarding the value and transparency of the scrutiny offered by AIBs. In addition they were seen as:

- offering a sense of collective responsibility
- facilitating problem solving
- providing challenge and support
- a means of developing senior and middle leaders

25. The evidence indicates that AIBs have had an indirect rather than direct function in generating change to influence the performance of schools. AIBs have functioned typically as a support mechanism for the Headteacher and the senior leadership team in their role of self-evaluation and driving school improvement.

26. AIBs have generally been more effective when they have been located in a receptive environment. Thus an active, able and engaged Head, with a positive relationship with the Adviser, a concerned and promising SLT, and a strong data management system, are all features of schools in which AIBs have been able to work more effectively.

27. AIBs were also more effective when attendees had relevant experience and less effective when they were perceived to be an additional element of bureaucracy.

The contribution of SCC funding

28. There was a great deal of diversity in the specific interventions for which PtS schools used the SCC funding, reflecting individual school contexts and challenges. PtS schools included schools operating with a budget deficit; seriously neglected school infrastructure; a history of poor leadership resulting in a neglected and demoralised staff body; a larger than average FSM cohort; being in special measures and facing a series of Estyn recommendations; or a negative relationship with (or inappropriate support from) their Consortium or LA.

29. Analysis of the uses of SCC funding among PtS schools in 2014/15 indicated that there were four broad categories into which most expenditure fell: supporting targeted pupil interventions; CPD courses for teachers; capital investment to improve the school learning environment and the recruitment of additional support staff.

30. In 2015/16, the focus of spending was in similar areas but was also influenced by the progress that schools had made:

- Schools that were able to identify challenges accurately and produce suitable proposals for tackling them, used funding for pupil interventions and enrichment activities that they expected to lead to a longer-term outcome.
- As leadership and management began to be addressed, the quality of teaching and learning became a higher priority and schools put more resources into teacher CPD and interventions designed to improve teaching and learning.
- A number of Headteachers saw the funding as an opportunity to be more experimental than they would otherwise have been, including trialling new initiatives. However, some thought this approach ran counter to the Welsh Government focus on sustainability.
- A few schools continued to suffer from severe instability that had hindered their ability to produce an effective plan or funding application.

31. The majority of schools recognised that they could not have fully funded their SDP without SCC funding, although there were mixed views on the degree to which funding was responsible for driving school improvement. The extent to which it contributed to achievement against school's improvement objectives depended on the quality of the self-evaluation that underpinned the School Development Plan, the appropriateness of the objectives in the plan, the suitability of planned interventions and the competence of the Headteacher and SLT.

32. In summary, SCC appears to have supported many improvements in PtS schools, though a range of other internal and external factors (including leadership) have played an important role.

The overall contribution of SCC

33. The principal aim of the evaluation has been to assess the extent to which the support made available to PtS schools has been successful in supporting an improvement in their performance i.e. considering issues of outcomes and impact. The two years over which SCC has been running are not long enough to assess fully its impact on 'hard outcomes' (attainment and progression) for pupils in PtS schools.

34. Instead, the evaluation adopted an approach informed by the theory of Contribution Analysis, which drew on both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Using this approach, the research considered the nature and extent to which external factors have supported or detracted from the success of SCC. It also considered what policymakers and others could learn in the development and implementation of similar interventions in the future.

35. The evidence from interviewees and documentary materials (including Estyn reports) suggests that:

- the quality of leadership and management had improved in the majority of PtS schools following participation in SCC
- progress in improving the quality of self-evaluation systems and processes was variable. The ability of a school to conduct self-evaluation is widely considered as ultimately dependent on the strength of school leaders
- access to SCC funding was commonly credited with supporting changes in teaching performance, contributing both to the introduction of CPD and, in some cases, extending it. In practice, such investments were often considered as contributing more to the changes in schools that had previously been declining (Group A) or coasting (Group B) rather than in schools that had already started to improve (Group C schools)
- in two-fifths of all PtS schools, SCC inputs were considered to be largely, or wholly, responsible for the changes in pupil engagement, with schools recruiting support staff as central to their approach to improving pupil engagement. Some schools were optimistic about the sustainability of perceived improvements in pupil attendance, hoping to ensure that good attendance became the norm. Others were less

sanguine about the possibility of maintaining progress once SCC funding was withdrawn.

36. SCC had contributed both to the introduction of CPD in PtS schools and, in some cases, extended it. It is not yet clear how transformational this has been. The programme has not been running long enough to have led to school-wide cultural change in approaches to teaching and learning, even though it has been of benefit to those who have participated in CPD and performance-related activities.

37. **In summary**, the evaluation provided a rich insight into the complexity of school improvement, demonstrated the value of careful diagnosis of individual schools' trajectories and needs, and highlighted the importance of tailored support that specifically helped to meet those needs. Although school interviewees tended to feel that SCC funding was the main factor in enabling improvements, it was the intelligent and targeted use of funding that most supported impact. Both Challenge Advisers and AIBs had a notable (though not always fully acknowledged) role to play in this.

1. Introduction

1.1 This report presents the findings of research undertaken by SQW on behalf of the Welsh Government as part of the independent evaluation of Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC). This report focusses on the contribution of SCC in improving the performance of Pathways to Success (PtS) schools, who benefitted from a proportion of the SCC funding.

1.2 Schools Challenge Cymru and PtS ran from 2014/15 to 2016/17 (three academic years). The findings in this report are drawn from fieldwork undertaken in the PtS schools from May to July 2016 (i.e. the second year) and build on the research (Carr and Morris, 2015) undertaken in the first year of SCC (i.e. May to July 2015). Therefore, the evaluation does not cover the third and final year of PtS. Where appropriate, we also include illustrative findings from surveys undertaken with pupils in Year 6 (feeder primary schools) and Years 7, 8, 9 and 10. A more detailed presentation of the results of these 'pupil voice' surveys can be found in Morris, Carr and Hardy (forthcoming).

Schools Challenge Cymru

1.3 Launched in June 2014 and rolled out to schools in September 2014, SCC represented a concerted effort by the Welsh Government to respond to variability in the performance of different schools across Wales in supporting the development of their pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In total, up to £40 million was made available to support the delivery of SCC during the first two years. A proportion of the resources were made available to 40 Pathways to Success (PtS)[1] schools and their wider clusters (each one commonly comprising of its feeder primary schools), and funding was made available to Regional Education Consortia[2] to help build capacity within the wider education system.

1.4 Initially identified by the Welsh Government in partnership with Consortia, support was targeted at those schools identified as underperforming and facing the greatest barriers to improvement. SCC drew on learning from previous initiatives of this type, particularly the London Challenge, which ran from 2003 to 2011 and was joined, in 2008, by two new areas, Greater Manchester and the Black Country, where it was known as the City Challenge (Hutchings *et al*., 2012). PtS schools have been encouraged, to reflect on the

[1] Note that two of the original 40 schools were merged shortly after the programme started, leaving 39 PtS schools.

[2] There are four Regional Education Consortia: Central South Consortium Joint Education Service (CSCJES); South East Wales Education Achievement Service (SEWEAS), ERW and the fully bilingual GwE. Full details of the participating Local Authorities can be found online at Governors Wales.

quality of their leadership and management, teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of their work with the wider community. By making improvements in these areas, it was hoped that the PtS would support an improvement in pupil learning outcomes, as well as learning lessons to support the wider education system to improve.

1.5 Between June 2014 and the end of the academic year 2015/2016, of the £40m set aside to support the implementation of SCC, £29,280,736 was spent on support for PtS schools (nearly four fifths of this was on revenue support). Mindful of the varying needs of these schools, support included a number of different elements. The expectation was that the combination of interventions would support an improvement in each schools' performance. Key elements are described below.

1. Schools Challenge Cymru Advisers

1.6 Each PtS school was assigned a Schools Challenge Cymru Adviser (hereafter termed an Adviser). Advisers were expected to take an active role in supporting their schools' improvement processes. Recruited by the Welsh Government, in partnership with Consortia, Advisers provided up to 25 days of professional support to each PtS school per annum.

1.7 To provide an interface between Advisers and the Welsh Government each PtS school was also allocated a named link officer. A named member of the SCC Champions Group provided additional support[3]. Monthly meetings, chaired by Professor Mel Ainscow (the Welsh Government's appointed Champion for SCC), provided an opportunity for Advisers to share effective practice and discuss how the impact of SCC could be maximised. As part of their role in monitoring performance, Champions were responsible for assuring the quality of the work of individual Advisers.

2. Schools Challenge Cymru Funding

1.8 PtS schools had the opportunity to apply for additional funding to help them overcome their barriers to improvement. Mindful of the different challenges facing each PtS school, Senior Leaders (in partnership with their Adviser and with support from their Champion) were required to submit applications on an annual basis. Each application had to demonstrate how SCC funding would contribute to a school's overall development plan and add to (rather than duplicate) planned activity. No ceiling was set for funding applications, although Senior Leaders were asked to consider the sustainability of any activities supported through the funding. The Welsh Government signed off individual applications, with funding paid out via the relevant Education

[3]The Champions Group, chaired by Professor Mel Ainscow comprises of Dewi Lake, Debbie Lewis, Sir Alasdair MacDonald and Alan Tudor Jones. The group was charged with monitoring the performance of the programme and ensuring that its impact is maximised.

Consortium. Responsibility for monitoring the expenditure of SCC funding sat, in the first instance, with the Accelerated Improvement Board in each school. The consortia (each of whom have a designated SCC Link Officer) had oversight over the appropriate payment of SCC funding.

3. Accelerated Improvement Board

1.9 As a condition of their participation in SCC, PtS schools were required to set up an Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB). Guidance from the Welsh Government suggested that the Board should meet monthly and should include representation from the Headteacher of the PtS school (who should, where appropriate, also chair the meeting), the school's Chair of Governors, a representative from the Local Authority, the designated Adviser, and a Headteacher from a primary school within the same school cluster. AIBs were designed to hold to account Senior Leaders in each PtS school for the implementation of their chosen school improvement strategy and to ensure that any additional funding accessed through SCC was spent effectively (Welsh Government, 2014).

4. School Development Plan

1.10 Each PtS school was also charged (with support from their Adviser) with ensuring that their School Development Plan (SDP) was consistent with new guidance from the Welsh Government, in advance of it becoming a compulsory requirement in September 2015. The guidance stipulated that the plan should provide a comprehensive articulation of how a school intended to overcome its barriers to improvement. In the plans, schools were expected to identify their short and (sustainable) longer-term improvement priorities and targets, the approaches that would be taken, and the basis on which the performance of the school would be assessed against anticipated outcomes. Schools were also expected to cost the activities proposed in the plan (ideally, with reference to the source of funding that would be used to support them).

Pathways to Success Schools

1.11 Although designed to target the more '*challenged'* schools, in their selection of PtS schools, the Welsh Government made explicit recognition of the fact that different schools were likely to face *'different challenges'* (Welsh Government, 2014a). To reflect this, they used a variety of indicators to create an initial list of potential PtS schools. Drawing on a **three-year average**, the Welsh Government used school performance data to identify this long list of schools, from which the final 40 were selected in consultation with Consortia.[4]

[4] Following the initial selection of PtS schools, two of these schools have merged. This report focuses on the remaining 39 schools.

1.12 Consideration of the historic performance of PtS schools revealed that, prior to inclusion within SCC, there was variability in both the nature and the level of challenge PtS schools faced. An examination of performance data in the year of the intervention does not provide sufficient insight into why some schools were involved. In 2014, for example, when the national mean of pupils achieving Level 2 Inclusive at Key Stage 4 (L2I) was 55.4%, one PtS school had a markedly higher proportion of pupils (70.7%) achieving this level. The lowest proportion of pupils achieving the L2I benchmark at a PtS school stood at 21.5%, a difference of 49.2 percentage points from the highest performing PtS school and 33.9 percentage points lower than the national mean. Levels of socio-economic disadvantage were similarly varied. In 2014, for instance, when the national average of pupils eligible for Free School Meals stood at 17.5%, 43.0% of pupils in one PtS school were eligible for Free School Meals, suggesting high levels of disadvantage, while in the least deprived PtS school, 11.4% of pupils were eligible (6.1 percentage points fewer than the national mean).

1.13 Synthesis of evidence from the evaluation in 2014/15 concluded that the rationale for inclusion varied and that while the approaches adopted by PtS schools were largely informed by their trajectory prior to their inclusion in SCC, they were also informed by the performance of their school leaders. Based on this analysis, the evaluation team suggested three contextual groupings for PtS approaches:

- **Group A:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared to have been **diminishing** prior to engagement with SCC and who were at risk of further decline. **Eight** PtS schools were identified as Group A schools.
- **Group B:** Schools in which the quality of provision appeared **stable** prior to engagement with SCC but were considered in need of improvement. **Sixteen** PtS schools were assessed as typifying Group B schools.
- **Group C:** Schools in which the quality of provision had **started to improve** prior to engagement with SCC (though were still below the national average). **Fourteen** PtS schools were best described as in this group.

Evaluation aims and design

1.14 The principal aim of the evaluation has been to assess the extent to which the support made available to PtS schools has been successful in supporting an improvement in their performance i.e. considering issues of outcomes and impact. However, in developing an appropriate approach to achieving this

aim, it has been recognised from the outset the limitations of applying a traditional experimental or quasi-experimental approaches in responding to the complexity of the intervention and differences in the approaches adopted by PtS schools.

1.15 Instead, the evaluation adopted an approach informed by the theory of Contribution Analysis (of which key proponents include John Mayne (2011). The evaluation avoids any explicit (and one may argue inappropriate) quantification of the attribution of SCC to any change in the performance of PtS schools in favour of a 'softer' measure of its contribution (drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence). Using this approach, the research considered the nature and extent to which external factors have supported or detracted from the success of SCC. It also considered what policymakers and others could learn in the development and implementation of similar interventions in the future.

Evaluation aims and objectives

1.16 As set out in the programme-level guidance produced by the Welsh Government (2014a), an improvement in pupil learning outcomes would be desirable, but cannot (and indeed should not) be the only dimension through which the performance of a school is assessed. As such the evaluation has sought to understand any changes in pupil learning outcomes within the context of changes in other key areas such as:

- **leadership and management**, including strategies adopted to improve the skills and competencies of Senior Leaders and changes in processes and procedures
- **teaching and learning**, including techniques used to identify and support improvements in subject knowledge and pedagogical practice, and support more effective use of formative and summative assessment
- **pupil engagement**, including strategies adopted to improve pupil well-being, attendance and reduce incidence of negative behaviours around the school.

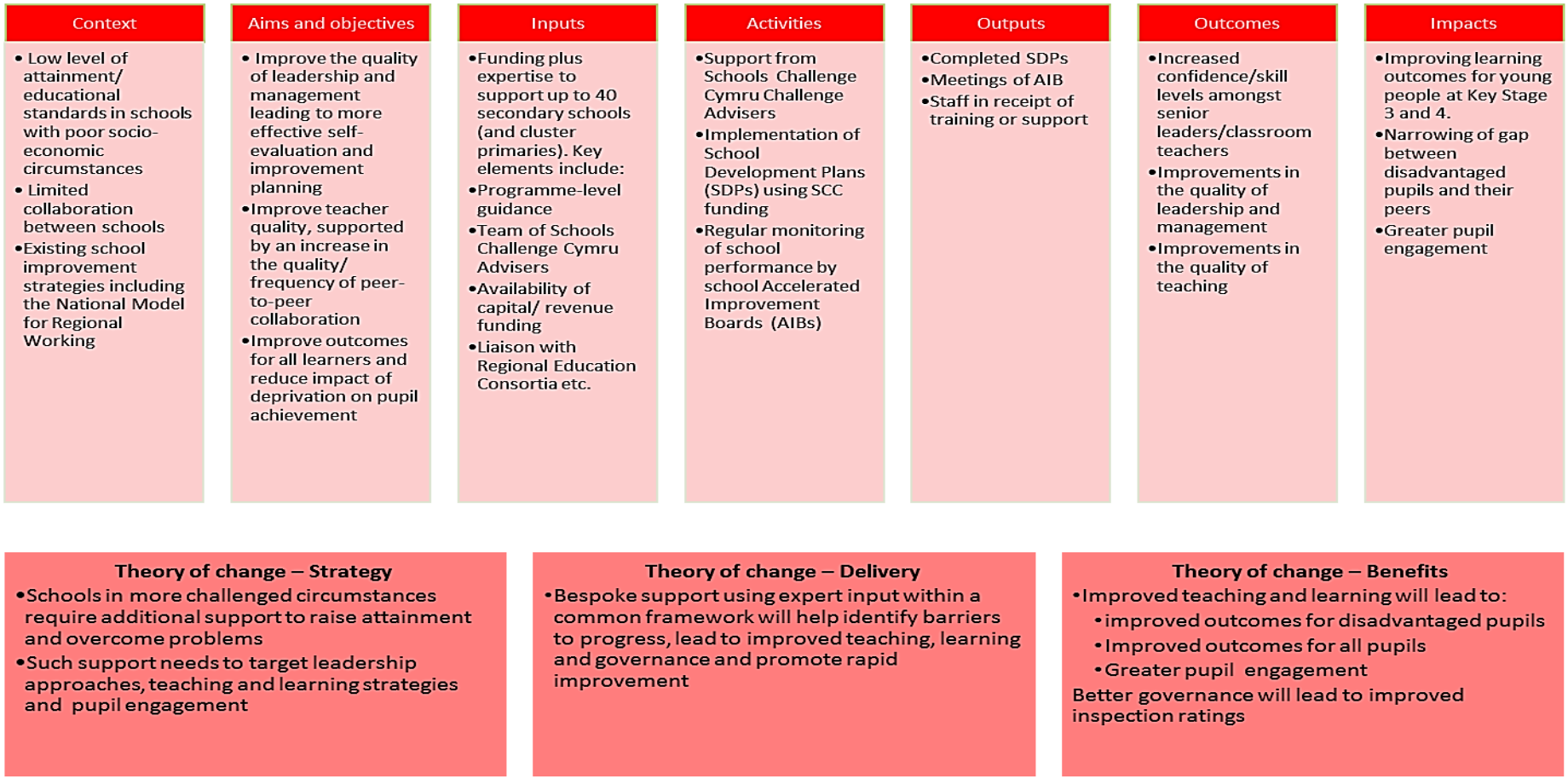
1.17 The evaluation seeks to understand any differences in performance and identify what has contributed to any noted improvements in the PtS schools, recognising that there was variation in need and in the amount/type of support received by them.

Research design

1.18 An overarching logic model informed the research design for the study (the initial SQW model was included in the first evaluation report). During the evaluation, the model was updated and some theories of change were identified and refined, relating to the strategy, delivery and benefits of the PtS programme. As set out in Figure 2-1, this model summarises:

- the **underlying theories of change** for SCC (including that access to a bespoke programme of support within a common framework would help identify barriers to progress in PtS schools and support improvements in leadership and management, teaching and learning and community engagement)
- the policy and practice **assumptions** underlying the intervention (underpinning the level of success of the SCC are a number of assumptions, including the capacity of PtS schools to work effectively with cluster primaries)
- the various **inputs** arising from the introduction of SCC (including access to support from an Adviser and the opportunity to apply for additional funding)
- the expected relationship between the inputs and the anticipated **outputs**, such as the way(s) that SCC funding has been used
- the **anticipated outcomes** (both short- and long-term), which might include improvements in the quality of leadership and management in PtS schools, in the quality of teaching and learning, and in terms of pupil engagement
- the projected **impact** of the interventions, which, at the outset, were expected to include an improvement in pupil learning outcomes at Key Stage 4 (in particular the proportion of pupils attaining Level 2 Inclusive) and a reduction in the gap between the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers.

Figure 6-1: Summary logic model for Schools Challenge Cymru



Source: SQW

Sources of evidence

1.19 This report looks at the evidence from the second year of SCC in PtS schools and reflects on the growing maturity of the programme. In addition to the collection of detailed qualitative data, it includes an analysis of attainment and attendance. It uses a Contribution Analysis approach to draw together the qualitative and quantitative data to provide insights into the relative contribution of SCC support to change in the PtS schools. The data for this stage of evaluation study (2015/16) was drawn from:

- desk-based reviews of publicly available and SCC specific documentation, SDPs and Adviser reports. In addition to the documents reviewed for 2014/15 and revisited this year (including School on a page and School Development Plans), the research team examined a wide range of school-specific documents including AIB reports, Estyn reports, information sent to parents, school self-evaluation reports and tracking reports.
- in-depth interviews with 14 SCC Challenge Advisers[5]
- Semi-structured interviews with seven local authority and consortia representatives
- visits to all of the PtS clusters. A total of 182 semi-structured interviews were completed over the course of the visits, and included:
  - head teachers/Senior Leaders and other staff in PtS schools, their cluster primary schools and their partner schools
  - other members of functioning AIBs
  - chairs of school governing bodies
- two waves of an exploratory survey conducted with pupils in Years 6, 7 and 9 in 2014/15 and in Years 7, 8 and 10 in 2015/16. Across the two waves there were 5,782 respondents, of whom 782 were tracked and completed the survey in both years (a total of 6,364 responses).

[5] Note that there were some changes to the Challenge Advisers for the second year of the project (see Chapter 5). Some of those who were interviewed in 2014/15 were re-interviewed in 2015/16, others were new.

Report Structure

1.20 This remaining chapters of this report explore:

- the approaches used adopted by PtS schools following their inclusion within SCC, considering similarities and differences in the approaches they adopted and examining the reasons for these approaches (Chapter 2)
- the progress made by PtS schools since the introduction of SCC, exploring outcomes for pupils (primarily attainment, attendance, but also exploring attitudinal change), and outcomes for the schools in relation to leadership and management and teaching quality (Chapter 3)
- the role played by programme-level guidance (Chapter 4), Challenge Advisers (Chapter 5), Accelerated Improvement Boards (Chapter 6), and SCC funding (Chapter 7) in the changes made in PtS schools
- the combined contribution of each of these elements of SCC in supporting improvements in leadership and management, self-evaluation, teaching quality, pupil engagement, learning outcomes and overall improvement (Chapter 8)
- the learning from this programme that should be considered in relation to aspects of school improvement (Chapter 9).

2. Understanding the approaches adopted by PtS Schools

Summary of key findings

By 2015/16, there was evidence of progress in the ways that PtS schools approached and implemented school improvement strategies and particularly in **improving teacher quality**. In summary:

- every PtS school now reported a programme of school improvement activities focused on improving teacher quality, reflecting
  - the increased priority interviewees attached to this area
  - greater confidence amongst senior leaders in being able to implement school-improvement activities
- there was a greater emphasis than in 2014/15 on building the capacity of individual teachers already working in PtS schools, rather than on bringing in new staff
- ways of working with partner schools had improved, with greater emphasis on joint CPD programmes and developing shared solutions to the challenges faced by both schools
- the early emphasis on the need to improve the quality of self-evaluation and school development planning was less evident as such systems became established
- there was a growing emphasis on improving leadership and management quality, with many schools investing more in the development of middle leaders to ensure that effective practices were cascaded down the school.

2.1 This section reviews the approaches adopted by PtS schools following their inclusion within SCC, considers any similarities and differences in the approaches they adopted and examines the reasons for these. Informed by feedback from key stakeholders in PtS schools, we reflect on whether PtS schools share a common school improvement model and the extent to which this is consistent with the model that was proposed in the first evaluation report (Carr C and Morris M, 2016).

Conceptualising the approaches adopted by PtS schools

2.2 Analysis of fieldwork data from 2014/15 indicated that PtS schools had adopted common approaches to overcome their barriers to improvement. However, there were different levels of investment in different types of activity. For instance, the relative investment in activities designed to support improvements in the effectiveness of school leaders was different to that used

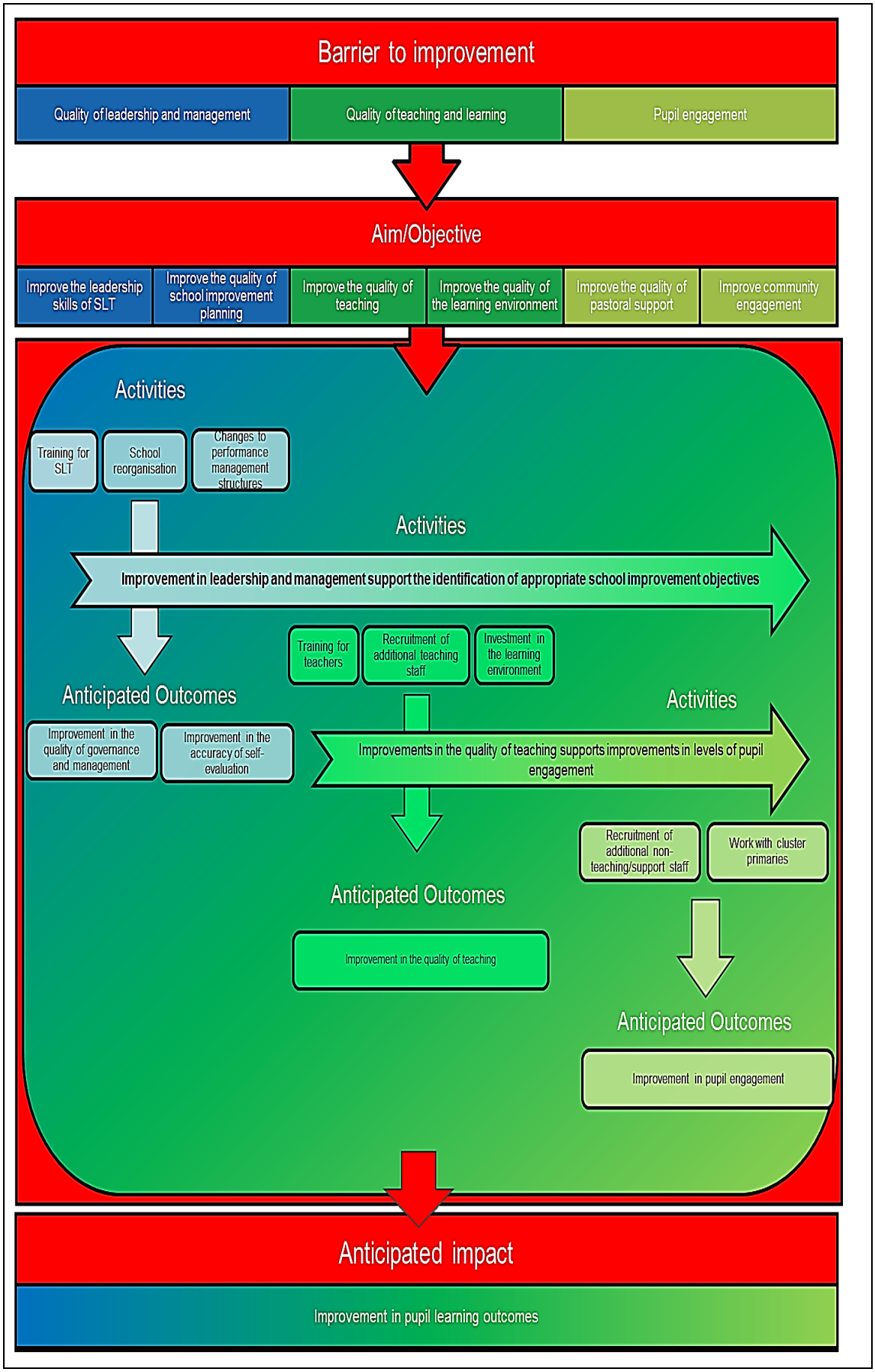
for activities designed to support improvements in teacher quality (Carr C and Morris M, 2016).

2.3 Based on the data available at that stage, such differences could be partly explained by the nature (and severity) of a school's development needs and the implicit assumptions about the relative effectiveness of different school improvement activities. Key amongst these were that:

- improvements in leadership and management would support the identification of appropriate school improvement objectives
- improvements in the quality of teaching would support an improvement in pupil engagement
- increased pupil engagement would support an improvement in pupil learning outcomes (Carr C and Morris M, 2016)

2.4 In reflecting on the feedback from key stakeholders in PtS schools in 2015/16, it has been important to consider the extent to which the approaches adopted were consistent with those adopted in 2014/15 and the extent to which the school improvement model (as presented in Figure 2.1) continues to be helpful in explaining the behaviour of the schools.

Figure 6-2: Conceptualising the approaches adopted by PtS schools



School improvement objectives

2.5 Consistent with effective practice (see Estyn, 2014), PtS schools were required to produce a school development plan (SDP) to access SCC funding. This plan was expected to identify a school's improvement objectives (SIOs) and the activity that would be used to address them. By 2015/16, all PtS schools had such a plan in place.

2.6 In most cases, the SIOs set out in the current plan were consistent with those reviewed in in 2014/15. Such a degree of continuity is important both in being able to assess the overall performance of PtS schools and in testing the extent to which the assumptions underpinning the adopted approaches were valid. For instance, if a senior leader had chosen to make major changes to their approach to school improvement from one year to the next, it would be difficult to assess the extent to which either approach was effective/ineffective. If a considerable number of schools were to make such changes, it would be difficult to assess the extent to which any approach was more or less successful in supporting improvement.

2.7 In practice, the relatively small number of PtS schools (six) in which senior leaders made such changes means that major analytical challenges did not arise. It is important, nevertheless, to consider the reasons for which senior leaders had made such changes to their approach to school improvement and what this can tell us about the effectiveness of SCC in these schools.

2.8 In five of the six schools that had made major revisions to their SIOs since inclusion in SCC, interviewees indicated that the primary driver behind this had been receipt of a disappointing Estyn inspection result. The recommendations made by inspectors for these schools had formed the basis of a post-inspection action plan (even where this was not mandated[6]). In each case, this plan had superseded the SDP as the driver behind school-improvement activity. Where Estyn had made recommendations that required changes to be made to SIOs, it is important to reflect on the appropriateness of their initial SIOs. In particular, whether more could have been done in 2014/15 to help such PtS schools to understand their challenges more clearly and to develop SIOs that would have addressed them more effectively.

Improving pupil learning outcomes

2.9 Given the high level of continuity between the SIOs in year 1 and 2 of SCC, it is not surprising that interviewees most commonly referenced SIOs related to

[6]The Education (School Development Plans) (Wales) Regulations 2014, place a requirement on governing bodies to revisit a school's development plan following an inspection. Production of a Post-Inspection Action Plan is mandated where a school is placed in a category of requiring significant improvement or in special measures (see Section 39 of the Education Act 2005)

improving pupil learning outcomes (interviewees in 29 of the 39 schools indicated that this was a key objective of their SDP). In 2014/15, interviewees indicated that they had prioritised improving the learning outcomes of Key Stage 4 pupils, but by 2015/16, also recorded an additional interest in targeting pupils at Key Stage 3 (18 of the 29 schools who had identified pupil learning outcomes as an objective).

2.10 The increased prioritisation of pupil learning outcomes at Key Stage 3 might well be welcomed as a sign that PtS schools are seeking to support medium-to-longer term improvements (in the hope that improving the progress made by pupils at Key Stage 3 will lead to an improvement in their eventual outcomes at Key Stage 4). It is important to recognise, that it is the types of activities that are supported, not just the Key Stage to which they are delivered, which determines the timeframe over which impacts are likely to be achieved and their sustainability.

2.11 For instance, the development and introduction of a cross-phase transition programme for Year 7 pupils (whether focused on a continuous curriculum or socio-emotional well-being) that continues to be implemented after the end of SCC funding, has the potential to deliver impact over the longer term. Catch-up classes for Year 9 pupils, however, might be expected to lead to improved attainment only amongst those that receive them. Unless more fundamental changes are made to teaching and learning provision throughout the school, then such classes for Year 9 pupils may continue to be needed, and this activity may not be sustainable without continued funding. It is important, therefore to consider both the type of activity funded and the level of investment available and to focus on those activities that will lead to long-term change, not just short-term gain.

Increase in pupil engagement

2.12 In line with the emphasis in the Welsh Government's programme-level guidance on supporting pupil-wellbeing (particularly amongst pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds), PtS schools commonly identified at least one SIO linked to supporting an improvement in pupil well-being, behaviour, motivation or attendance (which, for ease, we have termed 'pupil engagement'). Interestingly, in 2015/16 the prioritisation attached to this type of SIO had grown, with interviewees identifying improving pupil engagement a key priority in 20 of the PtS schools, an increase on the 13 that had done so in 2014/15.

2.13 As discussed, in relation to the apparent prioritisation of pupil learning outcomes at Key Stage 3, this increase in the number of schools prioritising pupil engagement SIOs could suggest a growing interest in changing the culture and ethos of a school with the aim of supporting a medium-to-long

term improvement in pupil engagement. That said, it could equally reflect a narrower agenda aimed at improving pupil attendance in the short term; some schools used the PtS to support the fixed term appointment of an attendance officer. It is important, therefore, to consider the nature of school improvement activities in judging the extent to which they are likely to support a sustainable outcome. Reaching such an understanding is likely to be particularly important given the announcement in 2017 that SCC would discontinue at the end of 2017/18.

Improving leadership and management

2.14 As discussed in Carr and Morris (2016), interviewees in around half of the PtS schools in 2014/15 considered improving the quality of leadership and management in their school to be a top priority. In 2015/16, the proportion of interviewees that indicated that this was the case had fallen slightly to just over two-fifths (16 schools). Further to this, in these schools the emphasis shifted from a focus on improving the skills and capabilities of senior leaders to enhancing those of middle leaders and the extended leadership team. Such a change might be considered to be a positive indicator that the senior leaders felt that they were demonstrating the characteristics that would allow their school to flourish in the future and/or were receptive to the idea of a more devolved leadership strategy. In examining feedback from external stakeholders, we have also had to consider the extent to which the judgement of senior leaders around the strength of leadership in their school is thought to be sound.

2.15 The need to explore these perspectives is emphasised when looking at the relative prioritisation of leadership and management as an aspect of development planning of PtS schools. In 2014/15, senior leaders in six of the eight Group A schools (those schools deemed at most risk of decline prior to participation in SCC) indicated that improving leadership and management was a priority for them. By 2015/16, the number of senior leaders in these schools continuing to regard it as a priority had reduced to two of the eight schools. It is important to reflect on whether improving leadership and management is prioritised appropriately in PtS schools. It is also crucial to understand the rationale for different levels of priority; does this reflect a move from improving the skills and competence of the management team, or a greater focus on ensuring that there is development in the wider system, for example. This is particularly the case where the available supporting evidence did not show any improvement in school outcomes.

Improving teaching and learning

2.16 Although there has been an apparent decline in the prioritisation of improving leadership and management, there appeared to be notable increase in the number of schools in which interviewees identified the need to improve teaching and learning as a key priority. In 2014/15, just over one-third of the interviewed senior leaders saw this as a priority (Carr C and Morris M, 2016). In 2015/16, senior leaders in over one-half of all PtS schools indicated that this was the case.

2.17 Interestingly, this increase was observed mainly in schools that the earlier research had identified as relatively stable but performing less well than might be expected, given the characteristics of their pupil intake (the Group B schools). As noted by a senior leader in one such school, the change in focus might reflect the progress already made by 2014/15 in getting appropriate *'systems and processes in place to allow for the identification of priorities for improving teaching and learning'* (Senior Leader, PtS school). Staff in less than half the eight schools in Group A (the schools perceived as at risk of further decline), said that one of their top priorities had been to improve teaching and learning. It might be argued that there had not been enough time for them to reach this stage, even though improving teaching and learning was commonly viewed by external stakeholders as one of the most sustainable ways of improving the overall performance of a school in the long-term.

School improvement activities

2.18 Senior leaders were expected to outline activities that would support the achievement for each SIO identified in an SDP. The guidance produced to accompany the Education (School Development Plans) (Wales) Regulations (2014) noted that, in a strong plan, senior leaders should ensure that it was clear over what timeframe objectives would be achieved and also identify the resources sufficient for implementing them (Welsh Government, 2014b). In order to understand the performance of PtS schools within SCC, it is important to identify whether the activities implemented by PtS schools have reflected the scope and scale of the SIOs.

2.19 In this task, it is important to recognise the difficulties faced in accurately monitoring expenditure (both of SCC and other sources of funding) due to variability in the ways in which PtS schools have chosen to report on this. This has been particularly challenging where activities have been supported using revenue funding and in-kind resources from multiple sources. As a result, it will not be possible to undertake a systematic comparison of expenditure. Rather, the evaluation focusses on the relative weight given to different types of activity by school-based interviewees.

Quality of teaching

2.20 By 2015/16, every PtS school reported a programme of school improvement activities focused on improving teacher quality, reflecting the increased priority interviewees attached to this area. Previously, in 2014/15, less than two-thirds of the PtS schools had reported it as a priority.

2.21 Since 2014/15, there has been a greater stress on the sustainability of activities. At the outset, the emphasis in many schools was on purchasing new IT systems to help with classroom practice and bringing in support staff to help improve the teaching and learning environment. By 2015/16, the focus was more on ensuring that what was put in place was sustainable and that it contributed directly to improvement in the classrooms.

2.22 For example, some schools had explored IT-based systems for classroom improvement, such as access to the IRIS Connect software (a video-based tool to support interactive CPD and modelling of teaching strategies). Interviewees said it had been hard to make effective use of such tools at the outset, but by 2015/16 they had strategies in place to make more effective use of them. As one Senior Leader noted: *'last year we purchased access to IRIS (Connect) software, but we found it pretty hard going to get a pilot off the ground. This year we have looked to make use of the system part of our strategy for improving lesson quality'* (Senior Leader, PtS school)

2.23 In 2014/15, interviewees in around half of the PtS schools indicated that they were using SCC funds to support new teaching or support staff positions. By 2015/16, interviewees in less than one quarter of the schools did so, reflecting growing awareness of the need for sustainability. Posts funded in this way would be at risk following the end of SCC. It is possible, of course, that some interviewees would have been unaware that this was how the SCC funding was being used in their school. However, the general story appeared to be that a greater emphasis had been placed on building the capacity of individual teachers already working in PtS schools (staff made more references to using Outstanding Teachers as mentors, for example) rather than bringing in new staff from elsewhere.

2.24 School interviewees made frequent reference to wider CPD programmes, with particular mention of activities in common with partner schools. Senior leaders noted that joint working had not always been successful in the past; as one senior leader at a partner school noted, their staff had initially seen their role as providing guidance and support to the PtS school, and the relationship had not been a partnership of equals. Since then, the approach to working together had changed, with a greater emphasis on developing shared solutions to the challenges both schools faced. By 2015/16, staff at both schools reported benefiting from activities that required the commitment of

both parties. At a time in which the Welsh Government is committed to encouraging peer-to-peer and school-to-school work (Welsh Government, 2014c) this feedback is welcome

Leadership and management

2.25 Despite the apparent reduction in the level of priority attached to improving leadership and management in the SIOs, the extent to which PtS schools were investing in activities to support this outcome was broadly similar over the years. Interviewees in around four-fifths of all PtS schools, in both 2014/15 and 2015/16, indicated that they had invested in activities to improve staff capacity and/or school development planning and self-evaluation.

2.26 There has been a change in emphasis, however. At the outset, there was a clear focus on investment in school self-evaluation, to identify needs and the priorities for development. In 2014/15, interviewees in around two-thirds of all PtS schools indicated that senior leaders had invested in activities designed to improve the quality of self-evaluation and school development planning. By 2015/16, this had fallen to around one half. In contrast, the number of activities focused on supporting improvements in the skills/capabilities of senior and middle leaders had grown. In 2014/15, interviewees in around two-fifths of all PtS schools had invested in such activities, increasing to around half of them in 2015/16.

2.27 The emphasis given to different activities varied by type of school. None of the interviewees in the Group A schools (those deemed at risk of decline prior to their participation in SCC) indicated that they had targeted self-evaluation in 2015/16. Instead, they had focused on reorganising and recruiting into their senior leadership team (with some schools seeking to increase the size of their leadership team), suggesting that leadership capacity and skills remained their central priority.

2.28 In other schools, senior leaders argued that the self-evaluation systems and processes they had implemented in 2014/15 were now starting to provide a regular source of evidence, enabling them to implement a programme of school-improvement activities that addressed the specific needs of their school. As argued by one senior leader, the challenge was not (as it had been before) to obtain the evaluation evidence but to ensure that both senior and middle leaders had the ability to interpret it in ways that led to action and supported improvement.

Improving pupil engagement

2.29 In both 2014/15 and 2015/16, interviewees in all 39 PtS schools implemented activities in support of improving pupil engagement, even though they did not all identify it as an SIO. There was variability in the way that schools defined

pupil engagement objectives, though the most frequent focus was on improving pupil attendance. As noted in 2014/15, interviewees had used SCC funding, for example, to recruit support staff, such as an attendance officer or behavioural support staff. However, what became apparent in 2015/16 was that many senior leaders were of the opinion that such support was now '*part of what* [we] *do'* (Senior Leader, PtS school) rather than a school-improvement activity *per se*.

2.30 That view highlights one of the challenges for PtS schools in the future. Many of the senior leaders said they wanted to maintain the level of support currently available to pupils (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds). However, where they funded support staff roles *wholly* through the SCC, they recognised that there would be a problem in maintaining such support. As noted by one senior leader: *'You can't escape it, once SCC ends we are going to have to make some difficult decisions about what we will be able to continue to do'* (Senior Leader, PtS school)

Improving pupil learning outcomes

2.31 In 2015/16 there was evidence that the majority of the PtS schools had invested in activities aimed at boosting the attainment of pupils, particularly those in Year 10 and Year 11. Interviewees in around half of all PtS schools indicated that they were offering a programme of catch-up interventions in English and Maths, for example. In seeking to explain why they had prioritised such activities, many interviewees reflected, as they did when talking about activities aimed at improving pupil engagement, they recognised that such activities were an important tool in helping current pupils to reach their potential (even if they were not enough to support long-term school-improvement).

2.32 The perception that catch-up interventions could be considered as a *'nice to have'* rather than an essential element of school improvement activity is reinforced through consideration of the type of schools in which such activities were supported. Notably, over three-quarters of all Group C schools (those that seemed to have been improving prior to inclusion in SCC) had supported such activities. As noted by one senior leaders in a Group C school *'the catch-up programme is helping us to increase the pace of improvement, without the funding we would still be making improvements but it would take longer to see the results'.* (Senior Leader in a PtS school)

2.33 Less than half of all Group A and Group B schools, where improvement was limited prior to the introduction of PtS, had chosen to invest in such activities, suggesting that, for many, there were more fundamental aspects of school improvement on which they had needed to focus, given the resources available.

Understanding the choices made by PtS schools

2.34 In reflecting on the choices made by PtS schools following their participation in SCC, it is clear that there had been some changes in emphasis since SCC started. That does not mean that schools had abandoned their initial priorities, or felt they had achieved their objectives. In 2015/16, for instance, schools continued to invest heavily in activities designed to improve leadership and management quality in the school. There was evidence that this investment was being devolved, with many schools investing more in the development of middle leaders (commonly Heads of Department) with the aim of ensuring that effective practices were cascaded down the school. In a review of the management structure in one school, the Challenge Adviser had identified the '*fragmented and ill-defined* [structure]*, with no agreement on protocols'* (SCC Adviser, PtS schools) as a particular barrier to improvement. By 2015/16, progress had been made, with middle leaders, rather than the SLT, taking responsibility for lesson observations.

2.35 The first evaluation report noted the low levels of investment that PtS schools appeared to be making in improving teacher quality. By 2015/16, there had been a notable increase in the number of schools that considered this as a priority, as well as in those implementing a programme of activities to achieve this objective. This reflects the greater confidence expressed by a number of senior leaders in being able to implement a programme of school-improvement activities.

2.36 There was a high degree of prioritisation attached to activities aimed at improving pupil engagement (in the sense of getting them to attend school). As noted by one senior leader *'we can't see attendance as a problem for the attendance officer* [alone*,* poor attendance] [it] *affects everybody'* (Senior Leader in a PtS school). By starting to address the poor attendance of those pupils who truanted regularly, staff felt that they could start to affect a much longer-term change in the ethos of the school. As argued by one senior leader *'we have started to show pupils that we care. Motivated pupils are the basis for a learning community'* (Senior Leader in a PtS school).

2.37 Such a finding is in contrast to the level of activity targeted at improving pupils' learning outcomes, to date. Despite the emphasis placed on raising attainment, the overall emphasis placed by staff on activities designed to target individual pupils was lower. As noted above, although around half of all schools had offered some form of catch-up programme to Year 10 and/or Year 11 pupils, there was evidence to suggest that such activities were viewed as '*to be prioritised only where funding was less of an issue'* (Senior Leader in a PtS school).

2.38 In conclusion, there was expected variability across the PtS schools in the priority they accorded different types of SIO. However, while schools may have prioritised certain long-term objectives in their plans (such as improving pupil attainment), their subsequent investment in school-improvement activities often revealed different short-term or medium-term priorities (such as improving leadership, self-evaluation or teacher quality), reflecting the differences in schools' contexts.

2.39 Despite this variability, it is possible to discern the foundations of a common school improvement model (as conceptualised in Figure 2.1). There is also evidence that senior leaders, in schools at different stages of their development, have made choices consistent with the theories of change that underpin the model and that the approaches implemented by PtS schools have been faithful to this. The question is whether the effective implementation of activities has had a positive impact on the rate of progress achieved by these schools.

2.40 The remaining chapters of this report look at each of the inputs and areas of activity under the PtS, reflect on any associated outputs (and outcomes) and explore the extent to which it is possible to identify what has led to change, for whom and why.

3. Assessing the performance of PtS schools following participation in SCC

Summary of key findings

An analysis of the performance data for PtS schools at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 suggests that considering the predicted and actual outcomes for schools alongside others with similar characteristics, and with similar levels of prior attainment, is helpful in assessing their relative performance.

While the PtS schools generally performed below the Welsh average in core subjects (as has been the case, historically) all of the PtS schools have made **academic progress** since the implementation of SCC.

- Schools in Group A (where the quality of provision appeared to have been diminishing prior to engagement with SCC) and Group C (where the quality of provision had started to improve prior to engagement with SCC) made more and faster progress than might have been predicted, given their pupil profile.
- Schools in Group B (those in which the quality of provision appeared stable prior to engagement with SCC) made the level of progress that would have been predicted, given their pupil profile.

PtS schools made less initial progress in improving **attendance**, than would have been predicted, particularly in 2014/15. However, during 2015/16:

- Schools in Group A and Group C made slightly more progress than was forecast from the data
- Schools in Group B still appear to have struggled, with lower levels of attendance than might have been expected, even without the PtS intervention.

External stakeholders thought that improvements had been made to the quality of leadership and management in around four-fifths of all PtS schools (32 schools). Where such improvements were not reported, schools were commonly characterised by recent changes within the senior leadership team. The new leadership in these schools were thought to have the potential to deliver the improvements required, but interviewees thought it would take time before they became apparent.

Interviewees in most PtS schools believed that gains had been made in improving the quality of self-evaluation. In most cases, such improvements were attributed to an improvement in the confidence of leaders to make decisions around school improvement.

3.1 An examination of outcome data for the 39 PtS schools highlights these points:

- There is a high level of volatility across the schools in attainment and attendance (pre- and post-intervention).
- On all 'hard' outcomes (such as L2I and capped eight scores), and for all sub-groups, the performance of PtS schools remains largely below the national average.

3.2 However, this hides the very real improvement made by many of the participating schools, both in aggregate terms and in relation to different groups of pupils. It also emphasises the need to examine the changes in pupil performance that have been seen in relation to each school's starting point and in relation to the activities put in place to implement their school development plan.

Evaluating the impact of PtS on pupil outcomes

3.3 In evaluating the impact of PtS, it has been important to recognise two main points:

- Point 1: It was not possible to use an evaluation approach in which the progress of PtS schools was tested against progress in a similar set of schools where the intervention did not take place. That is the counterfactual approach, which seeks to assess the impact of an intervention in the light of what might have happened had SCC not been implemented, could not be used.
  - First, PtS is one element of the wider Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC) programme, within which all schools in Wales have access to some support (via the consortia and Challenge Advisers) to enable their school to improve.
  - Second, SCC is itself one of a number of existing and national strategies and programmes that focus on school improvement,[7] on identifying and disseminating best practice in teaching and learning[8] and on promoting better outcomes in core subjects[9].
  - Third, the 39 schools (originally 40, prior to the merger of two PtS schools) included in the programme were identified because they were those in the most challenged circumstances; there was, therefore, no identifiable comparison group at the outset.

[7] See the National Model for Regional Working
[8] Such as the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinder
[9] Including the Literacy and Numeracy Framework

- Point 2: Each PtS school faced different challenges. They had prioritised, therefore, different areas for improvement, which in turn had implications as to the extent to which improvements in pupil outcomes might be expected. As noted in Chapter 2, an initial analysis of administrative data and stakeholder information suggested that there appeared to be three broad categories of schools, each with an associated school improvement approach. These groups provided the comparative framework for the analysis:

    - Group A schools - where the outcomes in the three years preceding PtS demonstrated that were in decline and at risk of further decline. The improvement approaches in these schools *tended* to focus on enhancing the capacity and skills of the senior leadership team.

    - Group B schools - where pupil outcomes in the three years before PtS suggested the school was stable but not making much progress. The improvement approaches in these schools *tended* to move towards activities to improve the quality of their self-evaluation.

    - Group C schools - where pupil outcomes in the three years before PtS suggested the school was making progress, but was still behind the national average. The improvement approaches in these schools tended to move towards activities to improve pupil engagement, but also emphasised improving teaching quality and enhancing middle leadership capacity.

3.4 These two main points (the lack of a true counterfactual and the different foci for school improvement) means that a realistic assessment of the true effectiveness and longer-term sustainability of the approaches adopted by (and with) PtS schools are only likely to be realised over a number of years and beyond the lifetime of the evaluation. It is nonetheless important to consider whether, in the short-term, the approaches they have adopted appear to be enabling schools to move towards their longer-term target. In undertaking this analysis, the research has been driven by the need to consider not only changes in performance trajectory (and for whom) but also the extent to which the PtS schools are performing better or worse than might be predicted given the profile of their participating cohorts (at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4).

Context

3.5 Aggregated attainment and socio-economic data from the three year period 2010/11 to 2012/13 informed the initial designation of PtS schools. In that three-year period, most were characterised by a high degree of volatility in the

proportion of successful pupils (those achieving the expected levels at Key Stage 3 or Key Stage 4). Between 2010/11 and 2012/13, one PtS school had experienced a year-on-year decline in the proportion of successful pupils, while 12 had seen a year-on-year increase (though at levels some way below the national average). In others there was no clear picture prior to SCC, with some schools having seen measurable improvements in one year and marked downturns in the next (or vice versa).

3.6 It is important to take such differences in prior performance into account when considering what might constitute a successful outcome for any one school. In a PtS school in which levels of pupil attainment were declining prior to SCC, it would be reasonable to expect that the level of attainment should at least stabilise following involvement in SCC. However, in a school in which performance had been stable over three years, continuing that stability over SCC would not have been a reasonable indicator of success. In a school in which levels of attainment had been gradually improving prior to SCC, one might expect that the rate of improvement after two years *might* increase.

3.7 It is worth examining this with reference to some performance data for the Level 2 Inclusive (L2I)[10] outcomes for the different groups of schools. This shows that, in the four academic years prior to the implementation of SCC, all three groups of schools (A, B & C) had a relatively high proportion of pupils who failed to achieve Level 5 or 6 (the expected level) at Key Stage 3 in English and/or Welsh and maths.[11] On average, across the four years prior to SCC, 33% of the pupils in Group A schools, 31% of those in Group B and 29% of those in Group C were unsuccessful in attaining the expected level at age 14. The proportion of these same pupils who then went on to achieve L2I was low: only four per cent of pupils in each case were successful in reaching expectations at Key Stage 4.

3.8 While the proportion of unsuccessful pupils at Key Stage 3 has declined in recent years, reflecting the national picture,[12] the rate of conversion (from below expected level at Key Stage 3 to expected level at Key Stage 4) has not changed in the two years since the introduction of SCC and PtS. Amongst the cohort of pupils who progressed from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 in that time, the conversion rate for those pupils who did not achieve the expected level at Key Stage 3, but went on to achieve L2I remained at four per cent for all PtS schools. This suggests that, for the first two years of the project, the lowest attaining students (those who failed to reach the expected

[10] L2I means achieving five GCSEs, including English/Welsh and maths at grades A* to C.
[11] Attainment at Key Stage 3 is measured using teacher assessments at subject level.
[12] See NLNP evaluation report (forthcoming). In PtS schools, the aggregated proportion of successful pupils at Key Stage 3 increased across all three groups of schools. In schools in Group A, there was a five percentage point increase (from 67% to 72%), a five percentage point increase in Group B (from 69% to 74%) and a six percentage point increase in schools in Group C (from 71% to 77%).

level) may not have been a priority, even where pupil engagement was a focus for the SIO.

3.9 This is supported by a review of the rate of conversion, post-SCC introduction, amongst the cohort of pupils who had had previously achieved the expected levels at Key Stage 3, for whom there were some notable changes in the aggregated level of success at Key Stage 4. Although overall performance in PtS schools at Key Stage 4 remained lower than the national average, there were positive changes in the proportion of pupils successfully progressing from Key Stage 3 (at or above expected level) to Key Stage 4 (achieving L2I). This differed by type of school, with the greatest improvements noticed amongst the schools that had previously been struggling. Amongst the schools in Group A, the proportion of pupils moving from an average Level 5 or Level 6 in English and/or Welsh and maths at Key Stage 3 to obtaining L2I at Key Stage 4 rose by three percentage points (from 57% to 60%). It also increased by two percentage points in schools in Group B (from 63% to 65%) and by one percentage point in schools in Group C (from 67% to 68%). This suggests that the PtS schools were becoming more effective in enabling pupils who might previously have been on the borderline for L2I achieve success at Key Stage 4.

3.10 Looking at these figures in isolation, however, ignores the wider 'cohort' effect. Much research since the 1990s has shown that aggregated attainment trajectories (even considering prior attainment) are insufficient as a measure of progress or intervention impact (see, for example, Crawford *et al.*, 2014). Alongside provision, there is a need to consider, in addition, the profile of the relevant cohorts. This includes the prevalence of factors such as the level of educational need and level of socio-economic disadvantage amongst pupils, which has been shown by previous research to be associated with lower levels of attainment.

Approach adopted

3.11 Given the limited time fame within which PtS has been operating and given the lack of a natural counterfactual, the research adopted an approach that used a statistical forecasting model to develop a *synthetic counterfactual*. The first step in building these forecasting models was to use National Pupil Database data[13] to develop a series of models to identify the factors that appeared to be statistically associated with the performance of the PtS schools.[14]

3.12 These factors were incorporated into 'conditional' forecasting models. These models made predictions based on potential future performance, considering

[13] National Pupil Database data on the PtS schools from 2010/11 to 2015/16
[14] These models were limited to the school and pupil-level variables that could be isolated from administrative datasets

both past performance and known school-level characteristics. These characteristics included the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals or with special educational needs. The models also controlled for changes in the performance of all schools. This was to reflect the trend in rising attainment across all schools and to provide the best possible indication of the performance of PtS schools relative to the all-Wales average.

3.13 The initial analysis that was undertaken considered attainment outcomes in English and/or Welsh and maths, as well as L2I and Capped Points Scores. However, forecasting models could not be built for all of these outcomes:

- Welsh was the main language of instruction in three PtS schools, which was insufficient to construct robust forecast models for Welsh as a first language. In 2016, tracked attainment outcomes (from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4) were available for only 153 pupils sitting Welsh as a first language exam.
- While reaching the expected level at English and maths was used as a proxy indicator of the potential to achieve L2I (see conversion rates above) the Capped Points Score is available as an indicator at Key Stage 4 only and there is no clear predictor at Key Stage 3, so no forecasting models could be generated for that measure.

3.14 Once the models were generated, schools' predicted performance was compared to their actual performance, to see whether the PtS schools had followed the expected trajectory or whether they had exceeded it. This approach offered a powerful tool by which to explore the improvements in PtS schools, though it is important to recognise that the forecasts are inherently a 'best-estimate' based on available data. Where prior attainment has been volatile (as in many PtS schools), the reliability of the forecast is inevitably lower.

3.15 In interpreting each forecast, it is important to note the statistical reliability and the extent to which any difference between the actual performance and the expected performance is statistically significant. The confidence intervals (CI) for each of the models (which show the range of values within which the true value of the forecast might lie) are very wide, even at the 95% level. This is because forecasting models generally require rather more years of post-intervention data than the two that were available for PtS. Most of the findings from this analysis, as expected, are not statistically significant because they lie within the CI. That does not mean they are not educationally significant, however, and the data illustrates emerging trends, patterns of progress and apparent effects. Despite the lack of statistical significance at this early stage, the findings are still commented on, as they are important to consider alongside the other evaluation findings presented in this report. Over time,

further data could be fed into the models for these schools, and this would enable the significance of the findings to be tested.

Attainment findings

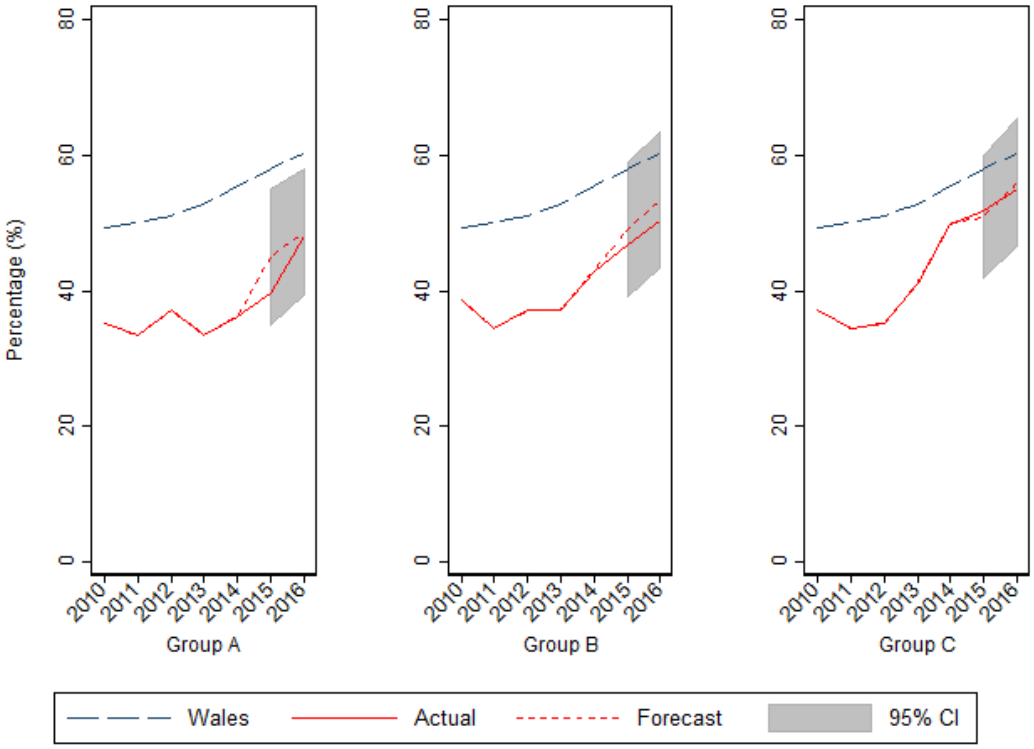
3.16 Five different forecasting models for attainment were generated, each of which drew on five years' worth of data prior to the launch of PtS to help 'smooth out' some of the volatility in school performance. Reflecting the differences in their PtS approaches, the schools were grouped according to the analytical framework (Groups A, B &C). Each of the models presents the data for all Welsh secondary schools as well as the conditional forecast for the PtS schools in the relevant group (A, B or C), and their actual performance in 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. The models also display the 95% confidence interval for the data.

3.17 The models discussed below look first at attainment (starting with the key indicator of L2I) then at attendance.

Level 2 Inclusive

3.18 As set out in Figure 3-3, the performance of the PtS schools remains below that of all schools in Wales. The forecast for schools in **Group A** (the dotted red line) suggests that, given the prior performance of the school and the characteristics of the cohorts in 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, the proportion of pupils achieving L2I should have increased. The actual performance of the schools (the solid red line), shows that, on average, progress was initially slower than forecast, but then increased rapidly, exceeding the conditional forecast for 2015/2016. Although the difference is not statistically significant (it is still within the 95% confidence interval), it shows that the Group A schools performed marginally better than would have been forecast in 2016 and are on an upward trajectory.

Figure 6-3: Proportion of pupils in PtS schools at Key Stage 4 achieving Level 2 Inclusive (academic years 2009/10 to 2015/16)



Source: SQW analysis of Stats Wales data.

3.19 The schools in Group C (the schools that had been making progress prior to the introduction of PtS) performed exactly as the model forecast, with the expected improvements being matched by actual performance. Schools in Group B, however, made some progress towards the all Wales average, but made *less* progress than would have been expected, given prior performance and pupil characteristics.

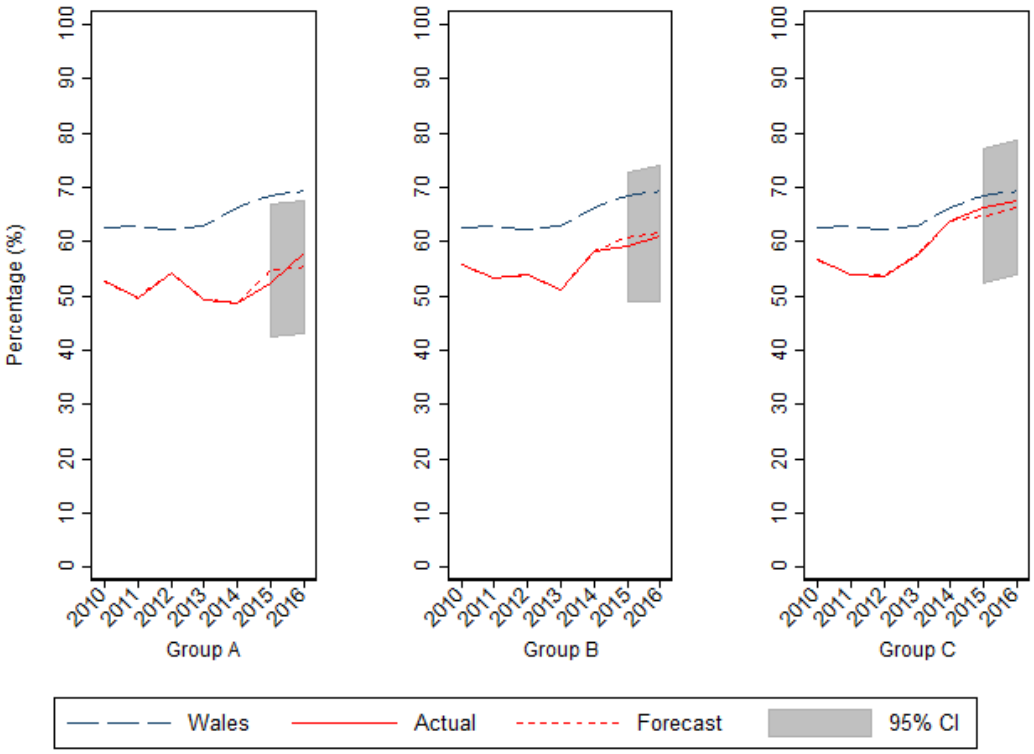
3.20 The story these three models tell suggests that schools in each group are making progress at Key Stage 4, with schools in Groups A and C at or above their predicted rate. The emerging picture suggests that, for schools in Groups A, participation in PtS *may* have accelerated the rate of progress towards the national average for L2I (although direct attribution is not possible).

Key Stage 4 English and maths

3.21 Schools in Group B performed as forecast in GCSE English Language, while schools in Groups A and C exceeded the forecast outcomes for the proportion of pupils achieving GCSE Grades A* to C in (see Figure 3-3). The schools in Group C, performed at a level just below the national average. They had made more progress in English Language than might have been expected

given the characteristics of their cohorts. Schools in Group A exceeded the forecast level of attainment; while the findings (as expected) are not statistically significant, they show clear progress in the right direction.

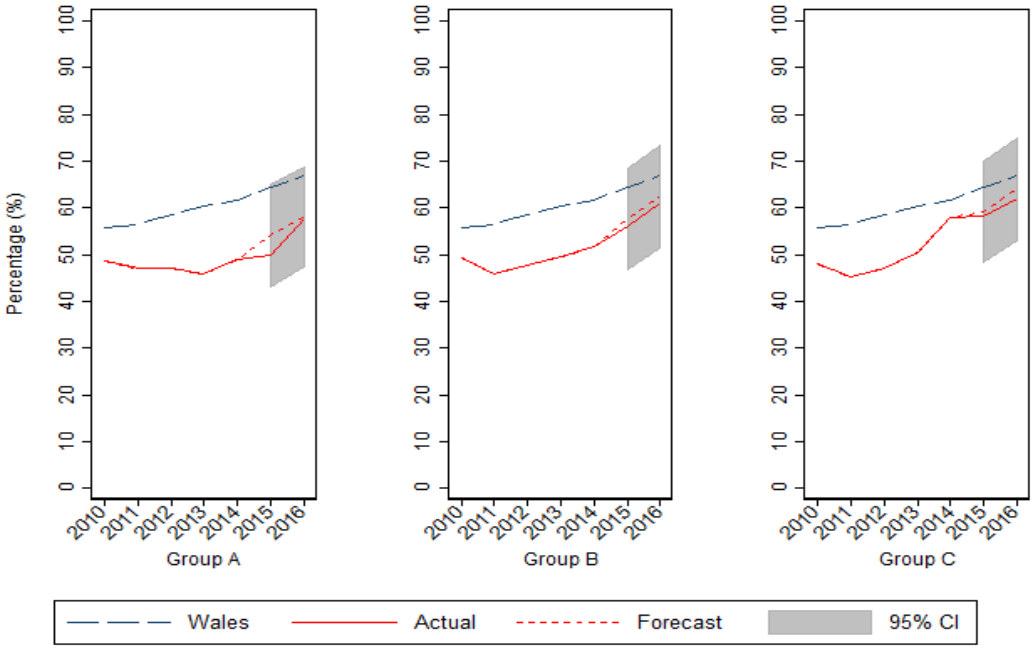
Figure 6-4: Proportion of pupils in PtS schools achieving GCSE Grades A* to C in English Language



Source: SQW analysis of Stats Wales data

3.22 In maths, the schools in Group A took longer to reach the level that was predicted for them, while the rate of progress in schools in both Groups B and C was slower than predicted (see Figure 3-4).

Figure 6-5: Proportion of pupils in PtS schools achieving a GCSE Grade A* to C better in maths



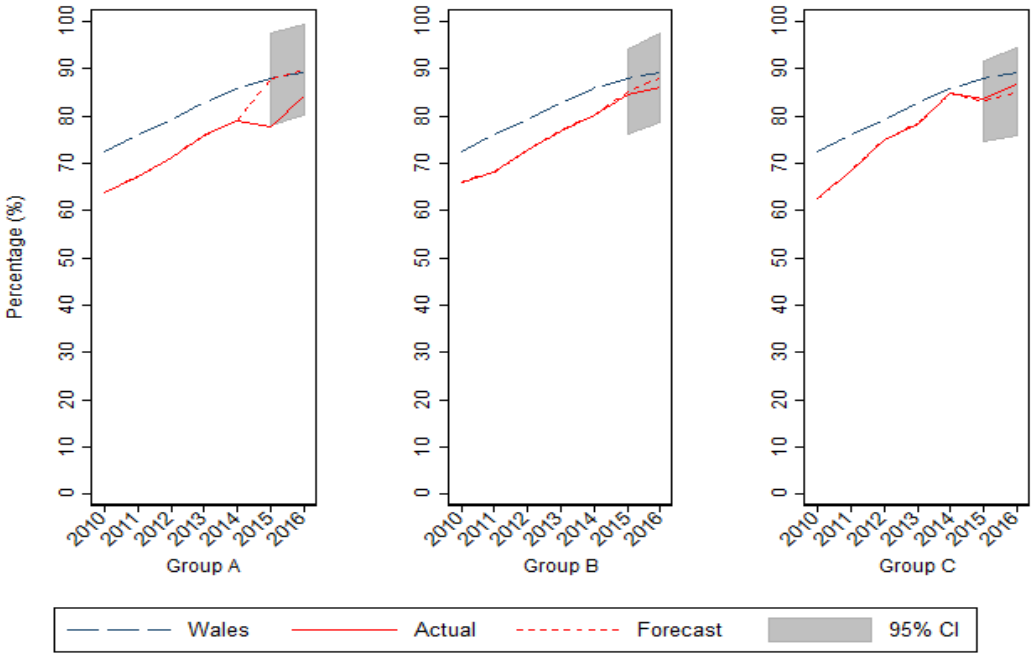
Source: SQW analysis of Stats Wales data

Progress at Key Stage 3

3.23 Progress at Key Stage 3 in English has been slower than at Key Stage 4, particularly for schools in Group A and B, where much of the early concentration of effort (as identified in the earlier report) was on pupils in Years 10 and 11. Schools in Group A, for whom the conditional forecast suggested that the improvements at Key Stage 3 seen in previous years would continue (to a level above the national average for secondary schools), declined during the first year of PtS before making progress improvements in 2015/16. While schools in Group B continued to improve after the introduction of PtS, the rate of progress was slower than predicted based on prior growth and their pupil cohort. Schools in Group C continued the pattern (of increases at higher than the predicted rate) that they had shown at Key Stage 4.

3.24 The pattern of progress against predicted outcomes is an illustration of the positive relative improvement in attainment seen amongst each group of schools and arguably a better indicator of performance than a single value for PtS schools.

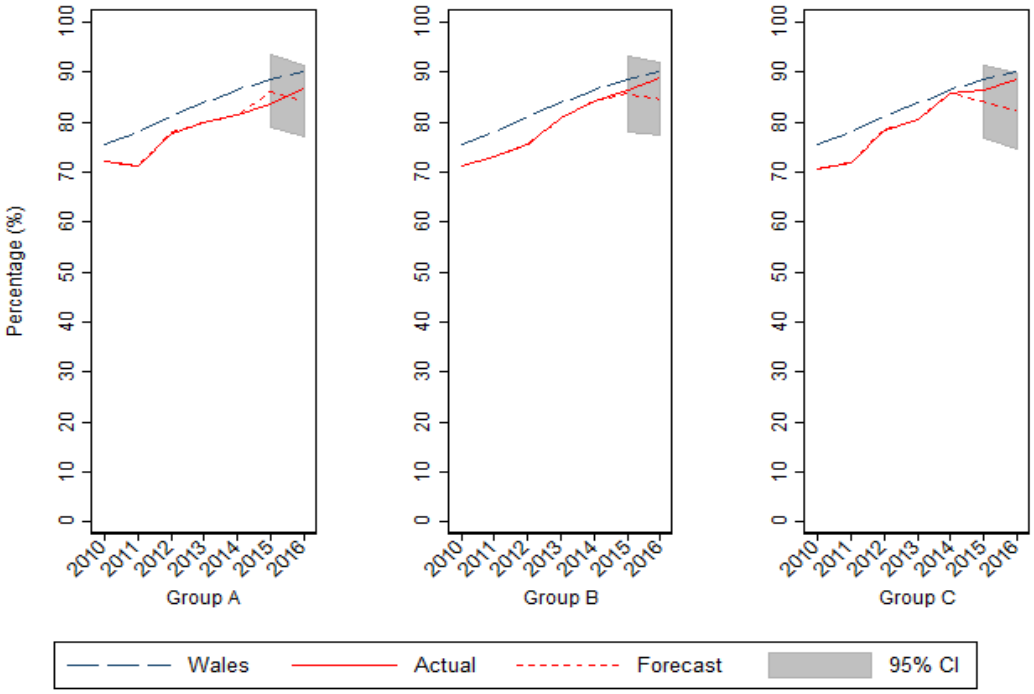
Figure 6-6: Proportion of pupils in PtS schools achieving the expected level at Key Stage 3 in English



Source: SQW analysis of Stats Wales data

3.25 The story for maths at Key Stage 3 was more encouraging. The performance of the schools in all three groups of PtS schools exceeded the predicted levels.

Figure 6-7: Proportion of pupils in PtS schools achieving the expected level at Key Stage 3 in maths



Source: SQW analysis of Stats Wales data

3.26 This exercise has shown that:

- **all of the PtS schools have made progress** since the implementation of SCC and that, in some cases, progress has been faster (and even greater) than might have been predicted, given their pupil profile
- **considering the predicted and actual outcomes** for schools alongside others with similar characteristics, and with similar levels of prior attainment, is helpful in assessing their relative performance.

3.27 The extent to which PtS has contributed to these improvements in attainment is explored in Chapter 8.

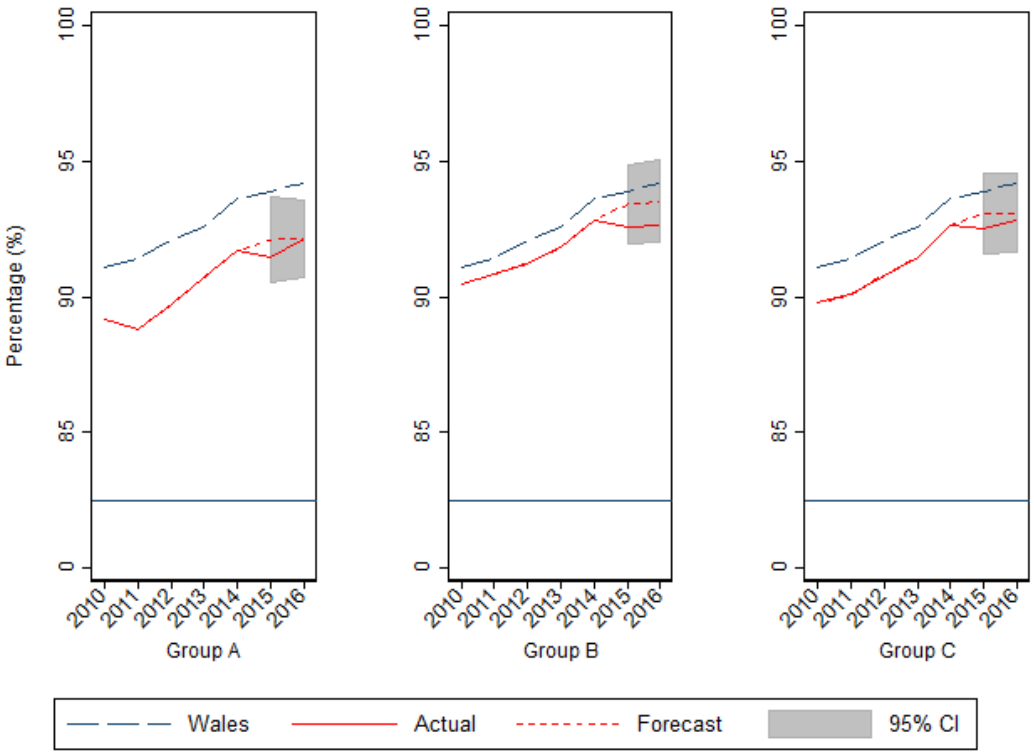
Pupil engagement

3.28 Although many PtS schools have invested in approaches aimed at improving pupil attendance rates, attendance rates are not the sole or most appropriate measure of the impact of wider efforts aimed at improving pupil-motivation and well-being. In the absence of other 'hard' measures to observe changes in performance of PtS schools it is worth reviewing attendance. Following the model adopted for attainment, forecasting models were generated to explore the expected and actual attendance levels in the 39 PtS schools.

3.29 The models (see Figure 3-8) suggest that, in the first year post-PtS, less progress had been made in improving attendance in each of groups than had

been predicted. While schools in Group B continued to struggle in the second year (with lower levels of attendance than might have been expected), schools in Group A and Group C seem to have had more success in the second year. Evidence from the pupils' survey appears to support this improvement. Pupils in schools in the most challenging circumstances (Group A) reported higher levels of personal truancy and lateness than their peers in other schools in 2014/15. Many of these differences (particularly in relation to truancy) were no longer evident in 2015/16, however, and the overall proportion of pupils reporting truancy and lateness in each school type was the same. Interestingly, in both survey sweeps, these pupils also tended to report higher levels of truancy and lateness amongst their friends than in relation to themselves.

Figure 6-8: Proportion of half-day sessions attended by pupils in PtS schools



Source: SQW analysis of Stats Wales data. Note that the axis has been collapsed between zero and 80% to enable variations in the data to be seen.

3.30 Considered alongside the feedback from PtS schools a more nuanced picture emerges. Notably, the majority of the PtS schools (34) argued that there was evidence to suggest that pupil engagement activities were starting to have a positive effect. However, ten interviewees reflected that they would not expect to observe such improvements in school administrative data for several years. As noted by one senior leader *'we are starting to bring some disaffected*

pupils around but you need to make a big difference before you see that work in the attendance stats' (Senior Leader in a PtS School)

Improving the quality of leadership and management

3.31 Pupil attainment is widely used as the most indicative measure of how effectively a school is meeting the needs of its pupils. However, in the context of the PtS schools, the full effect of the changes is only likely to be known over the medium to long-term. Therefore, other dimensions of performance that are likely to be a predictor of improvements in the future should be considered and the quality of leadership and management is central to this.

3.32 There is lack of a regular consistent outcome data to measure changes in this area or indeed even a common language through which to do so. Undoubtedly, Estyn, following an inspection, produces the most reliable source of evidence. However, although 20 such inspections have been undertaken of PtS schools since the launch of SCC, only seven took place in 2016. While consideration of the findings of inspection teams in these schools is a helpful place to start, it provides only a partial picture of the performance of PtS schools.

3.33 Strikingly, of the seven schools inspected in 2016, five were placed in a lower category for leadership and for self-evaluation than at their last inspection. Of the remaining two schools, one was a 'new' school and had not been inspected before; the other was placed in the same category as they had been in previously. Similarly, of the seven schools inspected in 2016, five were placed in a lower category for both of these areas than at their last inspection.

3.34 On the face of it, this could be regarded as a worrying outcome. However, it is worth bearing in mind that in the five cases in which schools were placed in a lower category than previously, the most recent inspection had been in 2011, around three years before the start of the programme. In practice, it is possible that if these schools had been inspected in 2013 (prior to the start of SCC) some would have been placed in a lower category at that point. Further to this, it is worth acknowledging that there have been several changes to the inspection framework (due to change again in 2017) and this was widely perceived by interviewees to have made it more difficult to retain or indeed improve on their existing rating.

3.35 Conversely, feedback from external stakeholders was more positive. The majority of such stakeholders indicated that improvements had been made to the quality of leadership and management in around four-fifths of all PtS schools (32 schools). Interviewees in a similar proportion of PtS schools argued that similar gains had been made in improving the quality of self-evaluation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in most cases such improvements were

attributed to an improvement in the confidence of leaders to make decisions around school improvement. While such changes may not translate effectively into an improved Estyn inspection result in the short-term, they suggest that many PtS schools are heading in the right direction in the longer-term, which may be picked up in future Estyn inspections.

3.36 In the relatively small number of PtS schools (around one fifth) in which external stakeholders felt that improvements had not been made to leadership and management, most argued that it was too early to say whether these had (or would) take place. Such schools were commonly characterised by recent changes within the senior leadership team. While it was commonly felt that new leadership in these schools had the potential to deliver the type of improvements that might be required, it would take time before they would become apparent.

3.37 It was notable that interviewees in Group A schools (those which were perceived to have been at risk of decline following the start of SCC) commonly indicated that much more progress had been made in their school than was noted by interviewees in other schools. While this is not surprising given that leadership and management was identified as a key priority in such schools, it is nonetheless heartening that progress was felt to have been made since participation in SCC. This is likely to be particularly important given widespread acceptance that such improvements would be a key driver of improvements in other aspects of school life.

Improving teaching quality

3.38 As in 2014/15, to support self-evaluation and school development planning, PtS schools had put a variety of systems and processes in place to support an assessment of teaching quality. These included a regular programme of lesson observations undertaken by senior and middle leaders. In many PtS schools, the results of such lesson observations were triangulated with those of book scrutiny and data drops (often produced on a termly basis).

3.39 Such activities provided interviewees with a number of different sources of evidence to reflect on when discussing changes in teacher quality in their school. That said, in many PtS schools interviewees indicated that a key priority had been to improve the reliability of the judgements made by middle senior leaders when undertaking individual performance management activities. As a result, they felt that to use such data to try and understand any change in overall teacher performance would be misguided. One Challenge Adviser, for example, working in a school that noted in its self-evaluation that 80% of lessons were ‘good’, brought in an external professional to evaluate the quality of teaching. The external perspective, that far fewer lessons were good and that middle leadership was ‘poor’, highlighted the gap between what the school thought was happening and reality.

3.40 Interviewees in most (31) PtS schools nonetheless suggested that they had anecdotal evidence to suggest that, following participation in SCC, the quality of lessons delivered by teachers in their schools had improved. Such improvements were attributed commonly to the effectiveness of CPD in building the confidence of practitioners and leading to more purposeful lessons using a range of pedagogical approaches.

3.41 The feedback from pupils suggests that there were some positive changes in the teaching and learning environment in PtS schools. Pupils in all of the surveyed groups (Years 7, 8 and 10) reported a wide range of interactive pedagogical strategies in 2015/16 and there were no significant differences in the opportunities reported between year groups, as there had been in 2014/15.[15] Pupils' responses also demonstrated a statistically significant increase in the variety of classroom approaches used by their teachers compared to the survey responses from secondary school students in Wave 1 (few students, by 2015/16, continued to think that teachers preferred them to work on their own, for example).

1.1 It is worth considering, however, whether encouraging practitioners to choose from a wide range of pedagogical approaches is appropriate in all circumstances. Indeed, some interviewees in Group A and B schools indicated that this type of approach was only successful where practitioners could be relied upon to make good judgements as to which approach would be suitable in a particular set of circumstances. In their schools, they argued that where the basic quality of practice was inadequate it had more impact to introduce a series of *'common rules or non-negotiables'* (Senior Leader in a PtS school). Only once these were embedded within the practice of their school did they believe that they would encourage the type of experimental approach that they argued was necessary to take a school from *'good to excellent'* (Senior Leader in a PtS school)

Assessing the overall performance of PtS Schools

3.42 In summary, there was evidence that each of the PtS schools (but particularly those in Group C) had made some progress in raising pupil attainment in Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 3, although the extent to which that progress was on a par with or better than was forecast varied. The perceived contribution of PtS to improvements in pupil attainment is explored more fully in Chapter 8.

3.43 Less observable progress had been made in improving pupil attendance; while schools in Group A and Group C have made more recent progress, attendance in Group B schools had not improved at the rate that might have been predicted, reflecting the long lead-in time between introducing interventions and observing aggregate improvements.

[15] Though awareness of external visitors was more prevalent amongst the younger students

3.44 Staff in schools tended to be more optimistic about the level of improvement than the external stakeholders, who were more cautious about claiming such developments. The extent to which staff and external stakeholders believed that PtS had contributed to progress (and the areas in which they observed such progress) is explored in the following chapters of this report.

4. The contribution of the programme-level guidance

Key findings

In October 2014, the Welsh Government introduced new guidance governing the development of **School Development Plans** (SDP).

- By 2015/16, all of the PtS schools had an SDP in place.
- However, it was notable that, while interviewees considered their plan compliant with the guidance, they expressed concern about their ability to resource a plan over a three-year cycle when grant funding was paid out on an annual basis.

Over the course of SCC, PtS schools have been encouraged to improve the quality of **collaborative activity within their school cluster** (commonly taken to comprise of local/feeder primary schools.

- By 2016, the number of PtS schools actively involved in work with their cluster had increased from just over two-thirds in 2015 to nearly all (over four-fifths).
- In schools with a history of working with their cluster prior to SCC, the quality and quantity of collaborative work had increased over the last year. This included an increasing emphasis on approaches designed to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.
- Peer-to-peer support networks had been established in just under half of the schools involved in **cluster collaborative activity**. These networks commonly included a subject specialist from a PtS school and two primary practitioners from different cluster schools. Most networks tended to be subject specific (English and/or Welsh, maths or science) and had focussed on a specific theme (such as book marking).

PtS schools have also been encouraged, where appropriate, to **collaborate with other secondary schools** (both with schools located in Wales and elsewhere).

- The proportion of schools that appeared to be working with secondary partners increased from around three-fifths to around four-fifths. In many cases, the driving force behind the identification of appropriate partners was a school's Adviser.
- There was wide variability in the aims of **partnership working** and the informal manner in which much of this work was conducted meant that there was limited evidence, at this stage, of the benefits of this work in helping PtS schools to achieve their school improvement objectives.

4.1 Since the launch of SCC in 2014, the Welsh Government has encouraged PtS schools to promote a range of different behaviours/practices through the

production of programme-level guidance. In this section, we consider the contribution of this guidance in supporting such changes. In particular, we explore the contribution of information and guidance relating to:

- school development planning
- the use of SCC funding
- work with cluster schools
- work with other partner schools.

School Development Planning

4.2 In October 2014, the Welsh Government introduced new guidance governing the development of School Development Plans (SDP), stipulating that all schools (including PtS schools) should have a compliant plan in place by September 2015. In fieldwork undertaken in 2014/15, it was evident that the majority of PtS schools either had such a plan in place already or were in the process of producing one. However, even where PtS schools had developed a plan, interviewees indicated that they had faced challenges in meeting the criteria set out in the guidance. These included ensuring that the planning cycle was fully resourced, and that the appropriate balance was struck between the need to meet national as well as local school improvement objectives (Carr & Morris, 2016).

4.3 In 2015/16, all of the PtS schools had an SDP in place. However, it was notable that, while interviewees considered their plan compliant with the guidance, they had interpreted guidance in a different ways, including how the SDP related to other department-level planning documents. Interviewees continued to express concern about their ability to resource a plan over a three-year cycle when grant funding was paid out on an annual basis.

4.4 In practice, the extent to which the Welsh Government guidance has led to changes in the way in which senior leaders approached school development planning was limited. Indeed, in only six PtS schools it seemed that the national guidance had influenced the content of the SDP, and in all cases, the impact appeared to be relatively minor. For instance, senior leaders in two of the PtS schools indicated that the guidance had led them to focus on the sustainability of planned activities and the extent to which objectives would be deliverable if the availability of grant funding reduced in the future. In a further two schools interviewees suggested that the template provided in the guidance had helped the school to restructure their school development plan. The new SDP structure was said to be more effective as a living document on which senior/middle leaders could reflect on a regular basis than the previous plans they had devised.

4.5 Three of these six schools were Group B schools (those that appeared relatively stable prior to PtS) and one was a Group C school (for which there was evidence of improvement prior to the introduction of SCC). The remaining two of the six were Group A schools, where there was evidence to suggest they were declining prior to being designated as a PtS school (and that they appeared to be at risk of further decline). It might have been expected that SDP guidance would be more pertinent and useful for Group A schools than those that appeared to be in Group B or Group C (see Chapter 1) but the evidence suggests that these schools were influenced by factors other than the Welsh Government guidance materials.

4.6 In four of the other eight Group A schools, interviewees noted that, where changes had been made to SDPs, these reflected feedback from Estyn, the Consortia or their Adviser. Although the changes made were seen as consistent with the direction of travel identified in the Welsh Government guidance, it is important to recognise that, given the relatively high levels of need faced by these schools, the guidance itself did not appear to be playing a major contributory role in planning.

The use of SCC funding

4.7 To help PtS schools to meet their school improvement objectives, the Welsh Government encouraged them to bid for dedicated funding, administered on an annual basis. Senior leaders were asked to submit an application at the start of the summer term for either capital or revenue funding. Initially, it was hoped that schools would apply by sharing their draft SDP to show how the plans and funding bids were linked. In practice, it appears that many PtS schools did not find this possible because of the timing and, instead, had developed a separate application.

4.8 In 2014/15 and 2015/16, senior leaders were encouraged to bid for as much (or as little) funding as they felt was commensurate with meeting the needs of their school. Feedback from interviewees in 2014/15 indicated that, while they recognised the need for schools to be held accountable for the use of public money, they were less convinced that the grant funding mechanism adopted by the Welsh Government was entirely appropriate (Carr & Morris, 2016).

4.9 Following feedback from senior leaders, the Welsh Government in 2016/17 decided to provide each school with an indicative allocation. Interviewees in just under one quarter schools were broadly positive about the approach taken for this funding round, but interviewees in more than one quarter argued that the process and the timing had detracted from the overall impact of the funding. Some interviewees were referring specifically to the final year of funding (when elections and the delayed release of the autumn draft budget meant the Welsh Government's ability to plan and approve funding was

delayed), but some were referring to earlier years and the difference in timing of school planning and funding cycles.

4.10 For instance, in four schools, interviewees were critical of the fact that they received confirmation of their funding allocation for the following year only at the end of the summer term. As noted by one Headteacher: *'our plan came through at 4.30pm on the last day of term. It's very difficult to effectively manage an intervention when approval comes through so late, especially as some of the support staff that rely on SCC funding had already started their summer holidays without knowing if they'd have a job in September'* (Headteacher at a PtS school). A second explained the practical need for earlier notification, noting that: *'the amount of funding received can have major implications for the feasibility of the* [SDP] *plan as a whole. It is important that the Welsh Government recognises that many of the activities in a plan are interlinked. If funding for one of them is not forthcoming, this has implications for others. In practice we have had to be creative in the way funding is used to accommodate this'* (Senior Leader at a PtS school).

4.11 Interviewees in three other schools queried the sufficiency of the funding and the balance between capital and revenue funding. As one senior leader commented, *'SCC funding has allowed us to step back from the brink*…[but] *the level of investment so far has barely scratched the surface of what is required to make the school work'*. Another argued: *'Given the state of the Local Authority* [finances] *we have been lucky to access capital funding…. However, this is a drop in the ocean compared* [to] *when you consider the state of some of the* [school] *blocks… We can't afford to afford to give the walls a lick of paint'* (Headteacher at a PtS school).

4.12 It is important to recognise that this experience was not universal. As noted by one Senior Leader, *'following the* [decrease in pupil numbers] *SCC funding has allowed us to move things forward and support staff in a way that we wouldn't have been able to afford* [otherwise]*'* (Senior Leader at a PtS school).

4.13 These examples highlight several different issues, including the extent to which PtS funding has been correctly aligned with planning cycles and the extent to which school circumstances affect the level and type of need.

Cluster-working

4.14 Over the course of SCC, PtS schools have been encouraged to improve the quality of collaborative activity within their school cluster (commonly taken to comprise of local/feeder primary schools). (Welsh Government, 2014b). Underpinning this suggested approach was the expectation that improved cluster working would ensure that the benefits of SCC were shared across the wider education landscape.

4.15 In 2016, and consistent with the aspirations of many of the interviewees in 2015, there was evidence to suggest that the number of PtS schools actively involved in work with their cluster had increased from just over two-thirds to nearly all (over four-fifths). Further to this, in schools that had worked with their cluster prior to SCC, interviewees indicated that the quality (and indeed quantity) of collaborative work had increased over the last year.

4.16 In addition, there was an increasing emphasis on approaches designed to **support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning**. A number of common approaches were identifiable. These included:

- **The recruitment/release of staff to support cluster working**: In nearly two fifths of the PtS schools there was evidence that staff had been recruited to support cluster working or that staff (commonly from the PtS school) had been given time to take on this role. Although the specific objectives varied from cluster to cluster, common aims including improving the quality of teaching and learning in core subjects. In most cases, the emphasis appeared to be on raising the skills of primary practitioners. However, in some cases, staff had facilitated opportunities for primary and secondary staff to interact and share effective practice in meeting the needs of pupils (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds).

- **The establishment of peer-to-peer support networks:** In just under half of those schools involved in collaborative activity, senior leaders had agreed to resource the development of 'peer-to-peer support networks' or (as commonly described by interviewees) *'teacher triads'*. These commonly included a subject specialist from a PtS school and two primary practitioners from different cluster schools. Most networks tended to be subject specific (English and/or Welsh, maths or science) and focussed on a specific theme such as book marking.

- **Aligning schemes of work at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3:** In nine clusters, interviewees indicated that this had been done at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. In most clusters, this was ongoing, and in a few cases, such work has had some early success. In one cluster, there was evidence that, following the agreement of the senior leadership team (SLT) in each of the cluster schools, Year 6 and Year 7 teachers were going to pilot a new commonly developed scheme of work in English and maths lessons. Designed to avoid what one senior interviewee described as *'that stalling time in Year 7 and Year 8'* and based on the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework, the schemes of work had been designed to *'support a cross-curricular approach to teaching literacy and numeracy'.* The senior managers felt

that the learning process would improve by better aligning the content taught to each year group and using similar pedagogical approaches.

4.17 There was some emphasis on the **moderation of teacher assessments** at Key Stage 2, although some interviewees said this cross-phase moderation (which had been a departure from what they had been doing previously) was now becoming standard practice. As noted by one Senior Leader: *'Over the last couple of years an improvement in moderation has meant that students now come to* [the PtS school] *with much more accurate results'.* A focus on supporting **transition activities,** targeted at supporting the social and emotional well-being of pupils as they moved into Year 7, was evident in clusters linked to just under one third of the PtS schools.

4.18 Despite evidence to suggest an increase in cluster working over the last year, few interviewees were able to provide hard evidence demonstrating the impact of activity. This is not surprising given the limited time over which activity has taken place. The outcomes of many of the curriculum-related activities to support effective transition will only be evident once pupils have made the transition, while the true impact may only be seen once pupils get to the end of Key Stage 3.

4.19 When asked to reflect on the principle driver behind an increase in cluster working, interviewees cited the main one as the availability of SCC funding to support this type of activity. As noted by one senior leader, *'you can't get away from the reality that it is a question of money. There are a lot of things I would like to do, but I know other schools simply couldn't bear'* (Senior Leader at a primary school). This apparent reliance on SCC funding to support the release of staff suggests there may be an issue about the longer-term sustainability of cluster working following the end of SCC funding. Interviewees were able to point to soft outcomes (including greater cross-phase understanding), but to convince schools to continue to support cluster working, given other pressures on time, it may be necessary for schools to be able to see an impact on 'hard' outcomes for pupils.

Partnership-working

4.20 Consistent with the Welsh Government's ambition to support the development of a self-improving schools system (see Crudas, 2015), PtS schools have been encouraged, where appropriate, to collaborate with other secondary schools (both with schools located in Wales and elsewhere).

4.21 Notably, since the first wave of fieldwork, the proportion of schools working with secondary partners increased from around three-fifths to around four-fifths. As in 2015, the majority of schools were working with multiple partners, with an emphasis on developing links with schools that either had an 'area of expertise' that the PtS schools felt that they could benefit from or a 'shared

issue/challenge' on which they could work together to develop a shared solution. In many cases, interviewees noted that the strongest relationships had been developed with other PtS schools.

4.22 In many cases, the driving force behind the identification of appropriate partners was a school's Adviser. Interviewees had developed relationships with other PtS schools with which their Adviser had been working, and in a few cases, PtS schools had developed a relationship with a school in which their Adviser had previously been a senior leader.

4.23 Perhaps not surprisingly, the aims of the collaborative relationships developed by PtS schools were variable, often depending on the seniority and specialism of the practitioners involved. For instance, while some schools had sought to develop the quality of their approach to self-evaluation, others had focussed on improving the quality of teaching of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

4.24 Given such variability in the aims of partnership working and the informal manner in which much of this work was conducted, it is perhaps unsurprising that evidence of the benefits of this work (in helping PtS schools to achieve their school improvement objectives) was limited at this stage. As the Welsh Government continues to encourage schools to increase the frequency and improve the quality of collaborative activity (whether in peer partnership or in clusters) it may be important to consider whether greater clarity of aims are needed to help schools identify potential (and actual) benefits.

5. The contribution of Challenge Advisers

Key Findings

Advisers exercised a significant amount of discretion in terms of how they engaged with their school(s). They used this discretion to identify the key challenges holding back a school's performance and then took action to tackle these problems.

- Where the capacity of the existing Senior Leadership team was identified as the main barrier to improvement, Advisers had taken on a range of roles to stabilise the school, sometimes beyond what would have been anticipated of an external 'adviser'
- As schools improved, Advisers changed their approach, becoming more of a critical friend and focusing more on activities to help improve the quality of teaching and learning and on improving self-evaluation, particularly through the better collection and management of data in the school.
- In the schools that made clear progress over the two years, Advisers broadened the range of their work to include both internal activities (concentrating work with departments seen as less successful or effective) and external activities with clusters or partnership schools.

In summary, Advisers worked more in partnership with better performing schools and were more directive with schools that were struggling.

Many PtS schools reported favourably on the value of their Adviser in supporting an improvement in school performance. Most expressed some reservations as to how the value of the Adviser could be disaggregated from other factors at work within and beyond the school.

In some of the more challenged schools, the presence of the Adviser was said to have been a source of stability and support. Where leadership was receptive to improvement, the Adviser had greater opportunity to help the school identify its main challenges and design appropriate interventions.

The strength of the relationship between the Adviser and the Headteacher was central. Where the Adviser and Headteacher had not developed a good relationship, this had a negative impact on the Adviser's ability to influence school improvement.

5.1 Each PtS school was assigned a Schools Challenge Cymru Adviser (an Adviser). The role of the Adviser was to support, actively, school improvement in their PtS school(s). Advisers were recruited on the basis of a strong background in education, with the majority being former Headteachers or Senior Leaders. Advisers had up to 25 days of professional support available to each PtS school per year but this allowance was used flexibly.

5.2 Across the 39 PtS schools, there has been a reasonable degree of continuity and stability amongst the allocation of Challenge Advisers, with the majority schools having the same Adviser across the two years of SCC. Around one third of PtS schools were assigned a new Adviser during 2015/16, with the changes related to areas of expertise, illness, retirement or, in some cases, a need to balance their workload. Schools that retained the same Adviser appeared to value the continuity, for the relationships that they had established and/or for the Adviser's understanding of their school. The assessment of Advisers in the first year of SCC concluded that the most effective Advisers had strong inter-personal skills and built good relationships with the Headteacher and SLT. This was also the case in 2015/16, with positive relationships strengthened further by the Adviser's growing knowledge of the school. One Headteacher remarked that, "*There was talk at the beginning of the year to re-shuffle some of the CAs between the schools, but the SL team feeling* [here] *was that they would not agree to replace the CA. They* [had] *built a good working relationship with him and did not want to change.*" (Headteacher, PtS school)

5.3 Where schools had experienced a change in Adviser, they generally felt that the new Adviser was able to provide better support. In some cases, this was because the Headteacher and the Adviser were able to develop a better relationship. In other cases, it was because the previous Adviser's workload appeared to have restricted their ability to support the school in a way commensurate with the Headteacher's expectations. In schools where Advisers were thought to be unable to give the school enough time, their contribution was felt to be less effective.

5.4 However, schools also commented on the "*slight disruption*" caused by the handover from one Adviser to another and the time required to establish new relationships. At least one school was aware they were going to get a third Adviser in the final year of SCC. Given the emphasis most Headteachers placed on building a relationship with their Adviser, this level of change was a concern. Continuity was relatively high in the Group A schools, although two of the eight had experienced a change in Adviser, reflecting a need to balance workload and give sufficient time to the schools.

5.5 This section considers the contribution of Advisers to supporting changes in PtS schools, in particular:

- the approaches adopted by Advisers to support PtS schools
- the reasons for variability in the approaches adopted
- the extent to which Advisers are perceived to have supported changes in PtS schools
- the effectiveness of particular approaches in supporting an improvement in the performance of PtS schools.

Types of approach and consistency of approach with prior school performance

5.6 In the first year of SCC (2014/15), Advisers took three distinct approaches to improving their assigned PtS schools, although some had blended these approaches depending on the particular context and progress of the school during the year. These were:

- Model 1: a **focus on improving leadership and management**. Where the capacity of the existing Senior Leadership team was identified as the main barrier to improvement, Advisers had taken on a range of roles to stabilise the school, sometimes beyond what would have been anticipated of an external 'adviser'.
- Model 2: a focus on school improvement and planning. In schools perceived to be stable, but where Senior Leaders were thought to be in need of additional support if the school was to improve, Advisers adopted the role of a **critical friend**, often with a focus on supporting Senior Leaders to improve the quality of their **self-evaluation** infrastructure.
- Model 3: an emphasis on **expert support** for school improvement and planning. In schools perceived to have started to improve prior to inclusion in SCC, Advisers had often taken on a more limited role, undertaking more specific and narrower duties.

5.7 The role of Advisers in 2015/16 broadly fell into the same categories, with Advisers emphasising the need to model and share good practice. The focus was less on innovation (although many of the actions were new to the individual schools) than on effective approaches for school improvement. For Advisers who were either new to SCC or new to the school, they had to review the potential of the school for improvement, particularly the capacity of the Headteacher and the SLT, as this was the main route for the Adviser to influence the trajectory of the school. Where the Headteacher or SLT was less effective, Advisers adopted Model 1, focusing on improving leadership and management as a precondition for wider school improvement. Where schools were in a position to improve or were already improving, Advisers employed

an approach that was nearer to Model 2 (the critical friend) or Model 3 (expert support) or a hybrid of the two.

5.8 For Advisers who remained with the same school for the second year, Model 1, typically, was not required because of the progress made during the first year. In some particularly challenged schools (or where schools had experienced additional turbulence during year 2015/16), Model 1 was still in evidence although support was generally extended beyond the Headteacher to the SLT and further down to middle leaders.

5.9 In other schools, there tended to be a shift towards more of a critical friend or expert support role, depending on both the progress made and external circumstances. There was evidence that Advisers changed their approach when the school was doing better, whether in reducing the time spent in the school or being less directive with the Headteacher. The support they offered tended to focus more on the quality of teaching and learning and on improving self-evaluation, particularly through better collection and management of data. In the schools that had made clear progress, Advisers broadened the range of their work to include both internal activities (concentrating work with departments seen as less successful or effective) and external activities with clusters or partnership schools. However, in a majority of schools, Advisers continued to undertake some activities around leadership and management, with interviewees observing that continued attention to this area was important in maintaining and improving school performance.

5.10 Advisers adopted different strategic approaches but there appeared to be a core menu of activities from which all Advisers drew. The particular use and weight given to these activities varied according to the overall aims of the Adviser in their work with the school. Essentially, Advisers adapted their approach according to the school's main identified challenges. The menu of activities included:

- **Managing/leading the AIB**: Advisers from schools across all three groups (A, B and C) were closely involved in the AIB, suggesting that such management was not linked wholly to levels of development. Most commonly, the AIB meetings were described as a process for encouraging transparency, performance monitoring and supporting the school in their improvement efforts. In some cases, Advisers' expectations of attendees were considered to be high. "*The planning and evaluation that takes place at AIB meetings is very rigorous. The Challenge Adviser scrutinises everything very carefully and all of the teachers/leaders have to come to sessions properly prepared*" (Senior Leader, Cluster Primary and AIB member). Where the Headteacher and SLT were less strong, this process tended to be driven more by the Adviser than the school leadership. The meetings were also seen

as a key forum for key stakeholders such as the Chair of Governors and primary cluster Headteachers to interact with the Adviser. This aspect tended to be more valued in schools that were doing better, as a way of publicising their improvement to these individuals.

- **Supporting the school SDP**: the degree of Adviser involvement in the development of the SDP depended partly on the ability and confidence of the Headteacher and the SLT to take on this role and partly on the relationship between the Headteacher and the Adviser. There appeared to be a continuum from confirming the content of the plan, through advising and informing, to writing the content of the plan. Typically, schools making more progress were more likely to note that the Adviser helped them to refine or 'tweak' their SDP, whereas schools still struggling received more input or oversight. An Adviser's role did not depend solely on the Headteacher's ability to produce a sound plan, however. In a few cases, interviewees reported that a weak Headteacher would retain ownership of the SDP rather than accept Adviser input. Some stronger Headteachers, clearly valued the knowledge and experience of the Adviser and appeared more open to their contribution.

- **Advising on performance management**: Half of the PtS schools reported that this was an important role for the Adviser and most of these were Group B schools. Advisers were often cited as instrumental in designing new performance management systems and training staff in how to use them and handle data effectively.

- **Supporting with staffing issues** such as recruitment or removal of staff. This was largely restricted to schools in more challenging circumstances and few Advisers were involved in this. Where they were involved, their input was seen as valuable. One Headteacher reported that they valued, "*having a second opinion on more difficult staffing issues*."

- **Undertaking specific projects**: Advisers led or worked on a wide range of specific projects and activities such as quality assuring book scrutinies, undertaking learning walks and lesson observations, conducting departmental reviews, dealing with behavioural issues, training governors and brokering partnerships with other schools. Advisers typically undertook defined projects according to their own expertise and the particular requirements of the school. One Adviser, for example, who had experience as a maths teacher, reviewed the maths department in one school and then made recommendations for ways in which it could be improved. Such activities were usually more

feasible in schools where structural challenges had been (or were being) addressed, than in those schools already making progress.

Reasons for variation in approaches

5.11 Overall, Advisers had a significant amount of discretion in terms of how they engaged with their school. They used this discretion to identify the key challenges holding back the school's performance and then took action to tackle these problems. Given many of the schools faced similar issues, it is not surprising that many of the Advisers took similar approaches. The first priority for most Advisers was ensuring the strength of the Headteacher and the SLT, closely followed by a focus on self-evaluation and performance management, and then the quality of teaching and learning.

5.12 Advisers also had a similar set of resources and routes to influence, namely a mandate to engage with the Head, the AIB, and formal sign-off of the SCC funding bid. This further explains why many of them undertook similar activities.

5.13 Finally, it was evident that Advisers' approaches varied across schools depending on their trajectory of improvement. They tended to provide more intensive support on leadership, for example, to those schools in the most challenged circumstances (Group A schools). However, it is also important to note that approaches differed according to the personality of the Adviser, the Headteacher and their consequent relationship. For example, some Headteachers preferred to limit interactions with the Adviser to themselves (and/or their SLT), whereas others were content for the Adviser to interact with the wider staff body and get deeply involved in specific projects in the school.

5.14 In essence, Advisers worked more in partnership with better performing schools and were more directive with schools that were struggling. By 2015/16, many PtS schools were engaged in a wide range of activities relating to most key aspects of school improvement. The process by which the Adviser helped to identify the challenge and design and implement the support varied considerably depending on the degree of need and receptiveness of the school. While all schools had access to leadership support, this ranged from fundamentals (such as recruiting a new Headteacher) to supporting devolved leadership (including reviewing middle management responsibilities).

Extent to which Advisers have supported changes in PtS schools and the impact of those changes on the performance of the school

5.15 Many PtS schools reported favourably on the value of their Adviser in supporting an improvement in school performance, although a handful thought the Adviser had not made a noticeable contribution. However, most

expressed some reservations about how the value of the Adviser could be disaggregated from the other factors at work within and beyond the school. This was most evident in terms of the quality of the Headteacher and the SLT with whom they were working. Where leadership was not strong, the Adviser's impact on the wider school could be significantly restricted, unless and until they could remove or strengthen an inadequate Headteacher or SLT.

5.16 Where leadership was stronger, or at least receptive to improvement, the Adviser had greater opportunity to help the school identify accurately the main challenges and design appropriate interventions. Indeed, Advisers were given credit for providing schools (and particularly Headteachers), with additional capacity, an independent perspective, fresh ideas, and external contacts. The role of one Adviser was described as: "*The Challenge Adviser has given the Headteacher a sounding board; being a leader can be quite a lonely place, so I think the Headteacher has valued having somebody to talk ideas through with*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school). In some of the more challenged schools, the presence of the Adviser was said to have been a source of stability and support, which helped them weather a difficult period.

5.17 Advisers also generated impact when they could affect structural changes in schools, for instance by strengthening self-evaluation and performance management, particularly through better handling of data. This work could provide staff with real insights into the functioning of their school and catalyse culture change. As noted in Chapter 3, an external review of teaching in one school (initiated by the Challenge Adviser), highlighted the gap between what the school's perceptions and reality and prompted a more thorough internal review.

5.18 For many schools, the quality of teaching and learning was a major issue. However, Advisers were not really in a position to affect direct change on school performance in this respect. The nature of the Adviser's role meant that they helped the school get itself into a position whereby it could improve (or continue to improve) rather than personally effecting direct improvement. In other words, they helped to improve structural factors such as leadership and management or a school's approach to self-evaluation. Having said that, there were various cases where Advisers were credited with effecting improvements related to specific projects and their own expertise, though these were usually found in schools that were already on path to improvement.

5.19 There were also some notable examples of Advisers helping schools to develop a culture of sharing good practice, for instance, through encouraging classroom displays and more open discussion between teachers and across departments. One Adviser specifically modelled positive behaviours to encourage senior leaders to get closer to the classroom. During visits to the

school, he avoided playing the '*supervisor role*' and instead spent mornings in classrooms with senior and middle leaders observing lessons. This was to emphasise the fact that improving standards in the classroom was a shared responsibility, with the school leadership observing practice and making decisions about what needed to be done.

Effectiveness of particular approaches in supporting an improvement in the performance of PtS schools

5.20 If it is accepted that Advisers are restricted in their ability to effect change and generate impact according to the state of leadership at a school, it is therefore critical that, where reasonable leadership is in place, Advisers are able to establish effective working relationships with the Headteacher and their SLT. Schools reported that Advisers were most valued when there was a good personal relationship between the Adviser and the Headteacher and this applied across all types of schools. As one interviewee stated, it is "*highly important that there is a high sense of commonality between Headteacher and CA… it is partly to do with respect*" (Headteacher, PtS school).

5.21 Where the Adviser and Headteacher had not developed a good relationship, sometimes because of what were reported as "personality clashes", this had a negative impact on the Adviser's ability to influence school improvement. For example, at one school the Headteacher viewed the Adviser as "*quite fixed in* [their] *ways*", which was not conducive to the role the school believed they needed the Adviser to play. In other cases, the Adviser was said to have been unable to build positive relationships with other important stakeholders such as local authority representatives. In one school, the perceived antagonism between the Adviser and the local authority representative on the AIB was thought to have had a negative influence on the whole process of school improvement.

5.22 A poor relationship could also stem from confusion over the role of the Adviser. There were examples where an Adviser was said to have given advice to middle leaders that appeared to contradict instructions from the Headteacher, or where there was poor communication between the Headteacher, teachers and the Adviser. In one case, this included the Adviser and a member of staff agreeing actions without informing the Headteacher.

5.23 Understanding the school, its challenges and where resources should be directed for maximum, long-term effect is also relevant to an Adviser's effectiveness. One interviewee said, "*a good CA pinpoints the fundamental issues and helps the School address them*" (Headteacher, PtS school). It is not about applying a '*sticking plaster'*. Another observed, "*You can't just have the money – you need to know how to spend it!*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

5.24 The development of understanding was not just about skill and the ability to build relationships but also about accessibility, with a preference for the Adviser to be based locally and not, as in some schools, in the North of England or further away in Wales. Availability was also important, with school interviewees highlighting the responsiveness of Advisers to mobile phone calls or emails and also commenting on their presence in the school. Where an Adviser did not invest sufficient time at the school, s/he was perceived to have a limited understanding of the school, its challenges and assets and hence a limited ability to affect school improvement. One Senior Leader considered that the Adviser had spent insufficient time at the school to fully understand what was required and offer the Headteacher the support he needed. In other cases, however, Adviser accessibility and availability was applauded: "*[The Adviser] usually comes for a whole day when an AIB meeting is scheduled and spends time with lots of staff aside from the Head*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

Table 6-1: Factors contributing to effective support

Advisers appear most effective, overall:
When they have a good understanding of the school and its challenges
When they have positive relationships with the Headteacher and SLT
When understanding and relationships are strengthened through continuity
When they adapt their approach to suit the school's particular challenges
When they are accessible to the Headteacher and the school
Advisers appear most effective in schools that are struggling:
When the Headteacher is receptive to making changes *or* can be replaced. If leadership and management is ineffective, an Adviser can have limited impact
Where the leadership is receptive and able to improve: • an Adviser can help a school address structural factors such as self-evaluation and performance management, which position the school for improvement • an Adviser can support accountability through effective running of the AIB
If the school is in a state of turbulence, an Adviser can offer stability and support
The combination of senior leadership experience and an outsider's perspective can allow an Adviser to support a school dealing with difficult staffing issues
Advisers appear most effective in schools that are improving:
When leadership and management is less of a fundamental problem, an Adviser can support a school to improve teaching and learning
In schools where the general conditions for school improvement are in place, an Adviser can offer additional capacity, an independent perspective, fresh ideas, and external contacts in relation to more specific challenges

6. The contribution of Accelerated Improvement Boards

Key findings

Perceptions of the role and value AIBs varied, although there was broad consensus across a wide range of interviewees and schools regarding the value and transparency of the scrutiny offered by AIBs. In addition they were seen as:

- offering a sense of collective responsibility
- facilitating problem solving
- providing challenge and support
- a means of developing senior and middle leaders

The evidence indicates that AIBs have had an indirect rather than direct function in generating change to influence the performance of schools. AIBs have functioned typically as a support mechanism for the Headteacher and the senior leadership team in their role of self-evaluation and driving school improvement.

AIBs have generally been more effective when they have been located in a receptive environment. Thus an active, able and engaged Head, with a positive relationship with the Adviser, a concerned and promising SLT, and a strong data management system, are all features of schools in which AIBs have been able to work more effectively.

AIBs were also more effective when attendees had relevant experience and less effective when they were perceived to be an additional element of bureaucracy.

6.1 All PtS schools were required to set up an Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB) as a condition of participation in SCC. The guidance document notes that the main task for the AIBs was to '*ensure that the improvement strategies are being implemented effectively and that rapid progress is being made*'.

6.2 As the AIBs evolved and matured, they became a context in which members held one another *mutually* accountable for carrying out tasks agreed at the previous meeting. At the same time, they continued to be seen as a way of holding to account Senior Leaders in each PtS school for the implementation of their school improvement strategy and to ensure that any additional funding accessed through SCC was spent effectively. Welsh Government guidance recommended AIBs include representation from the Headteacher of the PtS school, who should also chair the meeting, the school's Chair of Governors, a representative from the Local Authority, the Adviser, and a Headteacher from a primary school within the same school cluster.

6.3 This section will consider the contribution of AIBs in supporting changes in PtS schools, in particular:

- the approaches adopted by AIBs to supporting PtS schools
- the reasons for variability in the approaches adopted
- the extent to which AIBs are perceived to have supported changes in PtS schools
- the effectiveness of particular approaches in supporting an improvement in the performance of PtS schools.

Approaches adopted by AIBs to supporting PtS schools

6.4 In 2015/16, nearly every PtS school reported that their AIB performed a check and challenge function in relation to school performance and school improvement. In this respect, the AIB functioned as the guidance documents outlined across all types of schools (Welsh Government 2014). However, there was a degree of variety in how PtS schools interpreted the purpose of the AIB, which influenced the activities of AIBs and, partly, the structure and representation (or form) of the group.

6.5 In respect of form, AIBs were reasonably similar. They drew their membership from a roster of core attendees: the Headteacher Adviser, Chair of Governors, a LA representative, a Consortium representative, a primary cluster Headteacher, a partner school, members of the SLT, and the school's data manager. Some schools' AIBs had a very tight membership of perhaps only three to five members. Others brought in considerably more members. Membership, and attendance, appears to have been influenced partly by the attitude of the Headteacher towards the AIB, partly by the relationships between the school and possible attendees, and partly by the school's improvement trajectory. Better performing schools found it more useful to have a broader membership and attendees seemed more likely to be willing and able to participate.

6.6 There was almost no divergence in the leadership of the AIB: in almost all cases, the Headteacher was the formal chair of the board. In one case where an Assistant Headteacher was in charge, this was deemed unsuccessful because the Assistant Head, despite being competent, did not have the authority to make the AIB an effective scrutiny body. However, the extent to which the Headteacher drove the agenda and steered the meetings varied according to their interest and ability as well as the relationship they had with the Adviser. In the majority of cases where the school was making improvement or was reported as having the will to improve, the Headteacher was more often in charge, supported by the Adviser. In some schools where the Adviser had led the early meetings in 2014/15, leadership had naturally

shifted to the Headteacher as they gained confidence. Where the school was still in severe difficulties or had experienced a setback, the Adviser usually retained a more directive role. Broadly, it was felt that it was more appropriate for the Headteacher to be in charge of the meeting, with the Adviser undertaking, as expected, an advisory role.

6.7 The Headteacher often provided the most significant contributions to the meetings, usually in terms of relevant updates to the SDP and pupil data but other staff members were brought in to cover specific issues and responsibilities. This became more common in 2015/16, and was also more common among schools making more progress. The reasons for including other staff were twofold. The Headteacher, the Adviser and sometimes the AIB recognised that, to understand fully the issues they required input from someone closer to the issue than the Head. Second, it was seen as a way of developing senior leaders: "*Some of our staff have had quite an uncomfortable experience at the AIB, and they have had to go away, do more work and then return to provide a proper account of themselves. One staff member was very rattled when we asked about reading standards, and was unable to answer. We insisted that she come back the following month with a full response, and she had all the evidence. The problem was that she had never been asked to account for this previously, so this was a new discipline/skill that she had to acquire*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

6.8 As noted above, the purpose of the AIBs was linked to accountability for the SCC and school performance and that was largely how they were used. Schools differed in their interpretation of this purpose and this was reflected in their activities.

6.9 Some schools took accountability to mean scrutiny, which led to AIBs receiving detailed reports of pupil data to track progress both at the level of the school and the individual pupil. As one interviewee stated, the AIB meeting was "*a forensic approach, which is also practical*" (Headteacher, PtS school). Another described it as designed to leave "*no hiding place*" (Headteacher, PtS school) for the school's leadership. This concept of scrutiny was fairly common across all types of school, but there were clear differences in the views and actions taken by groups of schools that had been identified in 2014/15. The interrogation of pupil data was often the most important focus for schools on Group B still cautious about their rate of improvement. It was notable that Group C schools who appeared more confident about their rate of improvement were more likely to reduce the frequency of AIB meetings to half-termly or bi-monthly on the basis that changes in pupil performance could not be measured, meaningfully, on a monthly basis. Those schools with weaker performance in Group A, remained keen to retain the frequency of scrutiny.

6.10 In other schools there was a perception that the AIB offered "*more of a sense of collective responsibility*" (Senior Leader, PtS school), being "*more about problem solving and providing support*" than other bodies. The AIBs involving these schools went beyond examining data and identifying problems to considering the issues, coming up with solutions, planning, and shaping priorities. Some AIBs shifted between these two modes, depending on the interests and experience of their attendees. For example, "*The AIB has shaped some activities i.e. cluster work but they have been used more for reporting on activities*" (Senior Leader, PtS school).

6.11 Other schools felt there was a role for the AIB in sharing information about the school with key stakeholders. In some cases, this was about transparency. In others, it was about celebrating schools' success. This was in some part dependent on the relationships between the school and their AIB members: some schools valued the opportunity to have frank conversations with cluster primaries whereas others were cautious about exposing too much of the secondary school to the view of the primary schools in the cluster. Group B schools, tended to emphasise the value of bringing together stakeholders more often than Group A schools: "*face to face contact is very valuable and helps to build/strengthen personal relationships*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

6.12 Overall, wherever the balance was struck between scrutiny, challenge and support, the majority of AIBs followed a structured agenda that drew from a relatively short list of themes: performance and data, self-evaluation, progress against the SDP, teaching and learning, and other key school priorities. Schools also considered Estyn recommendations or action plans, and finance where appropriate. Some AIBs focused heavily on Key Stage 4, although some had moved on to a focus on Key Stage 3 and a few interviewees thought there would be benefit in extending the focus down to Key Stage 2.

Extent to which the approaches adopted by AIBs are consistent with the prior performance of a PtS school and reasons for variability in the approaches adopted by AIBs

6.13 AIBs have evolved as schools have progressed through the programme. One school reported that in the beginning most meetings had been used to audit their expenditure of SCC funding. Eventually they came to the view that this underused the expertise of the AIB and their capacity to support the school. The AIB meetings were revised to be a more open forum for challenge and support. In another case, a school saw itself as operating two different models for the AIB across the two years of their involvement. In the first year (2014/15) the AIB was a more "*protective environment*" and was "*used as a shop for delivering a message*". However, in the second year (2015/16) it was used as a vehicle to challenge existing practice, with one member feeling as if

she has been "*given permission to challenge*" the secondary school (Headteacher, Primary Cluster).

6.14 However, there is evidence to suggest that, rather than being determined solely by the prior performance of the school, AIBs have been shaped by their context. The prior trajectory of the school was often relevant, but interviewees identified other factors that also influenced the AIB, not least the personalities of its members. The more confident Headteachers appeared to take more control of the AIB, whereas newer or less confident Headteachers deferred more to the Adviser. In general, the more confident Headteachers were found in better performing schools, but there were instances of Headteachers in poorly performing schools taking charge of the AIB to its reported detriment. Relationships were also important in shaping the AIBs: some Consortia representatives were viewed as valuable participants, others were not, depending on the history of interaction between the school and its Consortium. This was also the case for primary clusters and Local Authorities.

6.15 Further, AIBs relied upon other inputs such as the quality of the data available to the school's leadership: "*AIBs are only as good as the information*" (Headteacher, Primary Cluster). Schools with poor data management could not make this a focus of their AIB meetings until the systems were in place to track pupil performance. For one school, after the data tracking had improved, the meetings became much more purposeful.

6.16 The evidence suggests that AIBs were generally effective in instigating some notable changes, but that their effectiveness was in part a reflection of the openness of the SLT to support change. Where schools were less accepting of change or where there was a denial of the severity of the school's crisis, the AIB was less effective.

Extent to which AIBs have supported changes in PtS schools and the impact of those changes on the performance of the school

6.17 Between schools, opinion was divided as to the value of the AIB, with one interviewee for example, stating that the AIB was a "*complete waste of space!*" (Headteacher, PtS school) because it duplicated existing mechanisms, but the exact opposite view prevailed in another school, where an interviewee saw the AIB as reducing such duplication. Another senior leader thought there were too many people involved in the AIB, yet some saw this as positive: "*very valuable as it brings all the key players around the table in one go*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

6.18 Opinions could be widely divided even within one institution. In one school, for example, interviewees variously stated that the AIB: had sharpened focus on self-evaluation; had improved the quality of leadership; was useful merely for sharing information to a range of audiences; provided constructive challenge;

did not come up with alternative ideas; was too narrowly focused on results; and had not contributed to school improvement.

6.19 However, there was broad consensus across a range of interviewees from different positions within different schools regarding the value of the scrutiny offered by AIBs. One interviewee gave the example of an AIB meeting in which the Headteacher gave a presentation on a literacy programme run through SCC and was able to explain clearly and in detail why the scheme had not worked. In this case, "*the scrutiny has been nearly as important as the money itself*" (Headteacher, primary cluster).

6.20 Some interviewees commented that the AIBs provided a more intense form of scrutiny than governors have done and such transparency was valued. A few interviewees reported that Estyn also valued AIBs as an accountability mechanism. One Headteacher observed that the experience of having external support and scrutiny was useful, as "*you can become quite isolated and bogged down as a manager, and it is great to have somebody external nudging you along*" (Headteacher, PtS school). It was stated that AIBs have helped to improve school performance through holding senior leaders to account and raising the level of challenge they face. The AIB offered the chance to shine a light on poor practice, "*The first AIB session I went to was like a cartoon and it hammered it home to me that something major needed to change*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

6.21 The AIB was understood, therefore, to have generated change and supported school improvement by improving the quality of leadership and management at schools, ensuring leaders understood and acted on information about their school's performance.

6.22 Other contributions of the AIBs included:

- building capacity among members to support the school: the inclusion of the Chair of Governors on one AIB had improved the performance of the governing body, and its understanding of the school
- identifying problems within the school
- offering guidance to the school
- functioning like a "think tank" by bringing new ideas to tackle the school's problems
- supporting the development of relationships with the LA and cluster primaries
- tracking progress against an Action Plan produced to support the investment of SCC funding.

6.23 In essence, the AIB has had an indirect rather than direct function in generating change to influence the performance of schools. AIBs have functioned typically as a support mechanism for the Headteacher and the senior leadership team in their role of self-evaluation and driving school improvement. One interviewee suggested that the degree of challenge offered by the Adviser was replicated by the AIB, although to a lesser extent. Nonetheless, the reinforced messages had forced the school to confront its failings and reassess its priorities and aspirations.

Effectiveness of particular approaches in supporting an improvement in the performance of PtS schools.

6.24 With the limited and supportive role played by the AIBs, they have generally been more effective when they have been located in a receptive environment rather than due to a particular approach. Thus an active, able and engaged Head, with a positive relationship with the Adviser, a concerned and promising SLT, and a strong data management system, are all features of schools in which AIBs have been able to work more effectively. It has also been observed that AIBs are more effective when attendees have relevant experience.

6.25 AIBs have tended to be less effective where they are perceived to be an additional element of bureaucracy. One Headteacher commented that too much administrative work was involved in setting up the AIB meetings, with little gain from his point of view. Some were also seen as a duplication of scrutiny functions; some schools, for instance, thought data on school performance was shared sufficiently regularly with the Welsh Government and Local Authority, without further discussion at an AIB. There was also a risk that where the meetings were less well-led they became viewed as little more than a talking shop. '*It is always nice to sit around and have a chat but there was too much weighing of the pig'* (Headteacher, PtS school).

6.26 It was not the case that AIBs were universally more welcomed in schools making progress. Some schools in Group B, where the qualitative evidence suggested that AIBs tended to play a more significant role, more frequently mentioned a negative experience or impression of their AIB than other schools. On the other hand, three schools specifically mentioned they wanted to continue or replicate their AIB, even if funding was discontinued. One Group A school (which was previously at risk of decline) was so enthusiastic about their AIB that they had set up a pre-AIB, which acted as a kind of rehearsal for the AIB and which allowed more governors to attend and see the data that would be presented. Some of the defining features of the approaches taken by the schools that wanted to continue the AIB included: a forensic approach to scrutiny of data at the meetings; inviting other members

of the SLT to attend and present; the involvement of a primary cluster head; and tours of the school for AIB members.

Table 6-1: Factors contributing to an effective AIB

When are AIBs most effective…
…overall?
When they are purposeful and well-led, by an active, able, engaged Headteacher and supported by the Adviser and a concerned and forward looking SLT
When they are seen as serving a specific purpose rather than duplicating other arrangements
When they are seen as efficient rather than bureaucratic
When attendees, such as the Chair of Governors, have relevant experience
When they build capacity among SLT, other staff and Governing Body members
…in struggling schools?
When the school was at least stable rather than in turmoil
When the AIB met regularly (that is, at least monthly)
When data management was reasonably strong so the accountability function can be delivered on
When it was used as to ensure leaders understood and acted on information about their school's performance
…in improving schools?
When the AIB engendered collective responsibility among Senior Leaders for considering issues, identifying priorities and coming up with solutions
When they developed into a more open forum for challenge, going beyond issues of pupil data
When a wider membership helped improve transparency for other stakeholders such as the primary cluster
When they met half-termly or bi-monthly, with meetings sufficiently spaced to allow changes to show up in data

Source: SQW

7. The contribution of Schools Challenge Cymru funding

Key findings

There was much diversity in terms of the specific interventions for which PtS schools used the SCC funding, reflecting individual school contexts and challenges. PtS schools included schools operating with a budget deficit; seriously neglected school infrastructure; a history of poor leadership resulting in a neglected and demoralised staff body; a larger than average FSM cohort; being in special measures and facing a series of Estyn recommendations; or a negative relationship with (or inappropriate support from) their Consortium or LA.

Analysis of the uses of SCC funding among PtS schools in 2014/15 indicated that there were four broad categories into which most expenditure fell (supporting targeted pupil interventions; CPD courses for teachers; capital investment to improve the school learning environment and the recruitment of additional support staff).

In 2015/16, the focus of spending was in similar areas but was also influenced by the progress that schools had made:

- Schools that were able to identify challenges accurately and produce suitable proposals for tackling them, used funding for pupil interventions and enrichment activities that they expected to lead to a longer-term outcome.
- As leadership and management began to be addressed, the quality of teaching and learning became a higher priority and schools put more resources into teacher CPD and interventions designed to improve teaching and learning.
- A number of Headteachers saw the funding as an opportunity to be more experimental than they would otherwise have been, including trialling new initiatives. However, some thought this approach ran counter to the Welsh Government focus on sustainability.
- A few schools continued to suffer from severe instability that had hindered their ability to produce an effective plan or funding application.

The majority of schools recognised that they could not have fully funded their SDP without SCC funding, although there were mixed views on the degree to which funding was responsible for driving school improvement. The extent to which it contributed to achievement against school's improvement objectives depended on the quality of the self-evaluation that underpinned the School Development Plan, the appropriateness of the objectives in the plan, the suitability of planned interventions and the competence of the Headteacher and SLT.

7.1 Schools Challenge Cymru offered PtS schools the opportunity to apply for additional funding to support work towards achieving their school improvement objectives. Funding was accessed through an annual application process. In their applications, schools had to demonstrate how SCC funding would contribute to their overall development plan (without duplicating planned activity) and to consider the sustainability of funded activities. No ceiling was set for funding applications, although indicative allocations were introduced in 2015/16. The Accelerated Improvement Board in each school held immediate responsibility for monitoring the expenditure of SCC funding and the consortia had oversight over the appropriate payment of SCC funding.

7.2 This section considers the contribution of SCC funding improvements in PtS schools, in particular:

- the ways SCC funding has been used by PtS schools
- the reasons for variability in the ways that SCC funding has been used
- the extent to which SCC funding has contributed to the implementation school improvement plans and the achievement of school improvement objectives
- the effectiveness of particular approaches in supporting an improvement in the performance of PtS schools.

Ways in which SCC funding has been used by PtS schools

7.3 Analysis of the uses of SCC funding among PtS schools in 2014/15 indicated that there were four broad categories into which most expenditure fell: supporting targeted pupil interventions; CPD courses for teachers; capital investment to improve the school learning environment; and recruitment of additional support staff.

7.4 Consultation with schools in 2015/16 revealed that these categories were still an appropriate way to group types of expenditure. The first three items in this list (pupil interventions, CPD and additional staff) accounted for four fifths of the total budget expended under SCC by PtS schools:

- **pupil interventions** encompassed a range of activities, some of which were narrowly focused on a small number of identified pupils while some addressed the needs of an entire cohort or specific groups (such as FSM pupils). Interventions were targeted on academic performance or on pastoral support
- **CPD** for teachers also comprised significant diversity. Some teachers attended external courses, including Outstanding Teacher Programmes. Others, by far the majority, accessed CPD within the

school with support from the Adviser, through having time released to undertake specific projects or to take on additional responsibilities, via a secondment to the SLT or through visiting different schools to view good practice

- **recruitment of additional support staff**: schools used SCC funding to pay for additional academic staff and/or to recruit staff to undertake roles with a pastoral focus such as Family Engagement Officer or Attendance Officer. In one school, funds were used to recruit a '*community champion'* to promote community involvement and increase parental engagement, with the aim of improving attendance and pupil behaviour.

- **capital investment** (which accounted for around one fifth of the total SCC funding allocated to PtS schools) was used to improve the school learning environment and covered items such as upgrading existing facilities, the development of new facilities (such as a learning and social hub for FSM pupils), and investment in IT equipment such as new computer hardware

7.5 One additional sub-category, **IT for school improvement**, became more important in the second year. This includes investment in pupil tracking software or performance management software as well as IRIS and similar programmes to support improvements in teaching and learning.

7.6 It is worth noting that some interviewees, including some Headteachers, were not always clear on what school improvement activities had been funded by SCC. There was no single reason for this lack of clarity. For some schools the funds they received (a mean of £199,000 a year over three years, though around £130,000 in 2015/16) was an important though not always substantial additional budget; it was effectively the equivalent of funds for an additional eight pupils in each year group in an 11-16 school. Schools also received a range of different budgets (including SEN funds and non-ISB funds) and interviewees were often unable to disentangle SCC funded interventions from other interventions. In some cases, the interviewee was simply not well informed on the sources of funding used for school improvement.

Reasons for variability in the ways that SCC funding has been used

7.7 SCC funding has been used, fundamentally, to support the achievement of school improvement goals and hence implementation of school development plans. This explains why there are some key commonalities in the ways in which schools elected to spend their funds: the PtS schools faced some common challenges relating to pupil performance, leadership and management and the quality of teaching and learning. Targeted pupil

interventions, and CPD for teachers and the SLT are obvious types of activity that address these challenges.

7.8 It also explains why there was so much diversity in terms of the specific interventions undertaken: schools operated in their own particular context, with their own individual history, staff and pupil bodies, local community and challenges. Particular circumstances included: schools operating with a budget deficit; seriously neglected school infrastructure; a history of poor leadership resulting in a neglected and demoralised staff body; a larger than average FSM cohort; being in special measures and facing a series of Estyn recommendations; and a negative relationship with (or inappropriate support from) their Consortium or LA. While the overall aims of school improvement may therefore have been relatively similar (for example increasing the school's L2I result) the routes to achieving this varied considerably from school to school. Hence the content of school development plans varied considerably.

7.9 The experience of the previous year of SCC was also part of the school's context and the background to the development of the 2015/16 SCC funding bid. Some schools had undergone substantial development in terms of their understanding of school improvement and their capacity for self-evaluation. Others had made less progress but, nevertheless, were more able to accurately identify challenges and produce suitable proposals for tackling them. In general, these schools used funding for pupil interventions and enrichment activities that they expected to lead to a longer-term outcome. As leadership and management began to be addressed, the quality of teaching and learning became a higher priority and schools put more resources into teacher CPD and interventions designed to improve teaching and learning. A few schools, however, continued to suffer from severe instability that had hindered their ability to produce an effective plan or funding application.

7.10 What was most marked, however, was the different attitudes individuals had to the SCC funding. This was partly shaped by their school context but also reflected their own experience and preferences. Headteachers often displayed different attitudes to innovation and sustainability, with some prioritising the former, some the latter; the two approaches were not always seen as compatible.

7.11 A number of Headteachers saw the funding as an opportunity to be more experimental than they would otherwise have been: "*SCC has allowed us to think outside the box*" (Senior Leader, PtS school). One Headteacher felt that his intention to use SCC funding to trial new initiatives, however, ran somewhat counter to the aims of the Welsh Government who he felt were "*obsessed with sustainability*" (Headteacher, PtS school). Others were more concerned about sustainability and thus shaped their bid around activities that

were intended to leave a legacy without requiring ongoing funding. One Headteacher commented that they had been careful not to request too much money to avoid the school becoming reliant on short-term grant funding and to ensure that the requests were all directed squarely at delivering the School Development Plan. A consideration of the implication of these different attitudes is important. An emphasis on sustainability may act as a counter to innovation, yet innovation may be needed where multiple challenges are being faced.

Extent to which SCC funding has contributed to the implementation of school improvement plans and the achievement of school improvement objectives

7.12 The majority of schools recognised that they could not have fully funded their SDP without SCC funding and thus the funding played a significant role in delivering the plan. The extent to which funding therefore contributed to achievement against school's improvement objectives depended on the quality of the self-evaluation that underpinned the plan, the consequent appropriateness of those objectives and the suitability of planned interventions. The level of the school's ambitions, capacity to deliver interventions and external circumstances also played a part in the achievement of school improvement.

7.13 Funding appeared to contribute most clearly to the achievement of improvement objectives when the objectives were defined tightly, more amenable to intervention, and in a context that was favourable. Thus interventions targeted at C/D borderline pupils in English and maths were often reported to have enabled pupils to increase their grade. Funding spent on improving the learning environment was also said generally to have achieved its aim although sometimes, in doing so, it threw into sharp relief dilapidations in other parts of the school environment.

7.14 Other objectives, such as improving the quality of leadership and management or teaching and learning, were influenced by SCC funded interventions. For example, some schools remarked upon the value of funding secondments for middle leaders to the SLT or allowing them time to pursue specific projects or undertake new responsibilities. Interviewees also commented on the importance of CPD for teachers, which was funded in a myriad of ways. Improvements for the specific individuals involved were attributed to these interventions as well as, in some cases, wider changes among the staff culture, such as greater interest in learning about good teaching practice from other schools.

7.15 However, there were instances in which interventions did not generate the desired outcomes. These included circumstances in which teachers had chosen not to engage with triads (peer to peer support networks - see

Chapter 4), or had not engaged with using the IRIS software for sharing different approaches. One Headteacher remarked that funding was not a mechanism that alone could alter working practices or culture. There were evidently barriers to school improvement that were not amenable to change through moderately funded interventions, such as performance issues with particular staff members. As interviewees attached to one school noted the lack of strong leadership in the first year of SCC, meant little had been achieved with the SCC funds. They achieved better results in 2015/16 when the leadership had been strengthened.

7.16 The recruitment of additional support staff had in many cases proved successful, with extra maths or English teachers giving some pupils the extra support required, Family Engagement Officers making a notable difference to the attendance rates of some children and Learning Mentors helping pupils to negotiate school life more successfully. Yet interventions in some schools were ineffective with Headteachers referring to their Teach First recruits dropping out early and activities to improve attendance rates failing to have any impact. These mixed outcomes were also witnessed in pupil interventions. Some, such as those focused on issues such as attendance or enrichment activities, were spoken of in glowing terms, as inspiring pupils, raising their sights and boosting their confidence. In other cases staff expressed disappointment that no real impact was perceived, despite a school's best efforts.

7.17 The divergent progress against these objectives is partly related to the fact that previous behaviours were often entrenched and, while, schools set ambitious goals, incremental improvements were often small and difficult to measure. The objectives were also susceptible to influence by a host of factors beyond the funding of a single intervention. One interviewee described the school's efforts directed at improving attendance, including funding additional staff and extending the capacity of existing staff, using both SCC and PDG funding[16], yet noted they had not succeeded in pushing attendance above 90%: "*We are almost despairing about this*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school).

7.18 The ability of funding to contribute to school improvement objectives is thus a function of many interrelated factors. One of the most relevant factors is the quality of the school improvement plan and this is predicated upon strong leadership and management, with the ability to self-evaluate, accurately, the school's performance and challenges. Consequently, schools with better leadership and management were in a better position to use funding effectively. One school interpreted this as funding being used to support school improvement rather than leading it.

[16] The Pupil Deprivation Grant is now known as the Pupil Development Grant

7.19 However, need and the potential for improvement is also pertinent and funding sometimes did make a significant contribution to schools in the most straitened circumstances simply because they were in such need. One school reported that without access to SCC funding the school would not have been able to make the necessary investments in the systems and processes that would allow the school to "*step back from the brink*" (Senior Leader, PtS school). Another described the funding as helping to stabilise the school during a period of turbulence.

7.20 There were mixed views on the degree to which funding was responsible for *driving* school improvement compared to other inputs. Some schools indicated that SCC funding was often used in conjunction with other sources of funding, and thus the SCC monies did not achieve anything in isolation. In contrast, other interviewees regarded the additional resource as a '*game changer'* (Chair of Governors, PtS school), as it allowed them to actively pursue school improvement at a time when finances were tight.

7.21 Perceptions of the importance of funding were influenced by the school's financial position and its improvement trajectory. Schools in deficit found the additional funding particularly apposite though more for averting crisis than achieving school improvement. In schools less subject to such pressures, where school improvement was deemed to be possible or already underway, the most commonly held view was that the funding had allowed the school to accelerate its improvement journey. One Headteacher stated he believed that school improvement was "*at least 18 months ahead of where it would have been without the funding*". In some cases, funding was considered to have had a wholly additional effect.

Effectiveness of particular approaches in supporting an improvement in the performance of PtS schools.

7.22 Across all schools, funding has been most effective where it had been used to support a sound School Development Plan and had been used in a favourable environment, for example with a competent Headteacher and SLT and an engaged staff body. Interventions that have generally been more influential are those that added substantially to the capacity of the school: recruitment of additional teaching or pastoral staff; appropriate CPD; IT investments such as performance management systems; and new or significantly upgraded facilities such as a learning hub.

7.23 However, a significant minority of interviewees stated that the impact of funding was limited by its scale. This was felt particularly by schools that had a poor learning environment but also by schools that could see the benefits of particular interventions such as the Outstanding Teacher Programme but were unable to afford to roll them out more widely.

7.24 This leads to the vital question of sustainability. While some interventions leave a legacy, such as training or capital investments, there was significant concern about how capacity created by the recruitment of additional staff could be sustained. One school highlighted the importance of the wellbeing team they had created in supporting pupils in a way that the wider community was unable to provide. "*Behaviour has significantly improved over the course of this programme because of the wellbeing team*" (Chair of Governors, PtS school). Yet the school considered the team would probably be unaffordable post-SCC. There were other instances of schools funding activities that were not anticipated to bear fruit immediately, including, for example, cluster working. In some cases, schools had plans to continue funding these activities but in others, the resources could not be found.

Table 7-1: Factors contributing to an effective use of funding

When is funding most effective…
…overall?
When the School Development Plan has identified correctly the school's key challenges and priorities and has designed appropriate proposals to address them
When it is targeted at a specific problem that is amenable to intervention and a defined outcome is expected and measureable
When there is a concern for sustainability or legacy or the opportunity for continued funding
When the school has capacity and competency to deliver interventions, particularly in terms of leadership
When staff are receptive to interventions, particularly CPD, new responsibilities and Teaching and Learning activities
When external factors do not present barriers to change
In some cases when combined with other sources of funding
When it is of sufficient scale
When the intervention adds substantially to the capacity of the school, for example: recruitment of additional staff; CPD; IT investments; and new or significantly upgraded facilities.
…in struggling schools?
When a budget deficit is not so severe as to absorb the bulk of the funds
When the infrastructure is not so neglected that the funds do not appear to make an impact
When the school is able to focus on school improvement rather than getting out of Special Measures
In severe need, funding might support stabilisation
In less need, funding can lead to school improvement
…in improving schools?
When the structural conditions for school improvement are in place, such as good leadership and management, funding can accelerate improvement

8. The contribution of Schools Challenge Cymru to changes in the performance of PtS schools

Key Findings

In summary, SCC appears to have supported many improvements in PtS schools, though a range of other internal and external factors (including leadership) have played an important role.

There have been too few years of SCC to assess its impact on 'hard outcomes' (attainment and progression) for pupils in PtS schools. The evidence from interviewees and documentary materials (including Estyn reports) suggests that:

- the quality of leadership and management had improved in the majority of PtS schools following participation in SCC
- progress in improving the quality of self-evaluation systems and processes was variable. The ability of a school to conduct self-evaluation is widely considered as ultimately dependent on the strength of school leaders
- access to SCC funding was commonly credited with supporting changes in teaching performance, contributing both to the introduction of CPD and, in some cases, extending it. In practice, such investments were often considered as contributing more to the changes in schools that had previously been declining (Group A) or coasting (Group B) rather than in schools that had already started to improve (Group C schools)
- in two-fifths of all PtS schools, SCC inputs were considered to be largely or whole responsible for the changes in pupil engagement, with schools recruiting support staff as central their approach to improving pupil engagement. Some schools were optimistic about the sustainability of perceived improvements in pupil attendance, hoping to ensure that good attendance became the norm. Others were less sanguine about the possibility of maintaining progress once SCC funding was withdrawn.
- SCC had contributed both to the introduction of CPD in PtS schools and, in some cases, extended it. It is not yet clear how transformational this has been. It is possible that the programme has not been running long enough to have led to school-wide cultural change in approaches to teaching and learning, even though it has been of benefit to those who have participated in CPD and performance-related activities.

8.1 In this section we assess the contribution of SCC in supporting changes in the performance of PtS schools. As discussed in Chapter 1, the absence of a true counterfactual by which to measure what would have happened if SCC had not been implemented means that judgements are based on a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data. Our assessment has been informed by the theory of Contribution Analysis (see Mayne, 2011). It has been undertaken using a systematic process focussed around:

- a consideration of performance of each PtS school following participation in SCC
- the strength of the evidence for any changes in performance
- the extent to which programme-related inputs have supported such changes (and the quality of the evidence for this)
- the contribution of other factors in supporting or indeed hindering improvement.

Assessing the overall performance of PtS schools

8.2 As discussed in Section 3, it is important that any assessment of the performance of PtS schools goes beyond pupil attainment and considers a fuller range of measures that reflect the differing starting points of PtS schools and the relative prioritisation of different SIOs, namely improving the quality of leadership and management, the quality of teaching and pupil engagement. In doing so, it is also important to acknowledge the lack of 'hard' outcome data by which to consider progress in some of these areas and the need to formulate judgements based on a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

8.3 In any discussion of the contribution of SCC to supporting changes in the performance of PtS schools, it is vital that two things are also borne in mind. The first is the rate of change that might be expected and/or has been seen. The second is the reliability of the evidence on which judgements are based (are they widespread and triangulated perceptions backed by observations and/or data, or the perceptions of a single member of the senior leadership team, for example?).

8.4 It is also important to consider the contribution of programme-related inputs in supporting changes. Many of the areas in which PtS schools were seeking to make improvements were subject to other (internal and external) factors that either enabled or acted as barriers to progress and these are considered in the analysis that follows.

The contribution of SCC in supporting improvements in the quality of leadership and management

8.5 The evidence from interviewees and documentary materials (including Estyn reports where available) suggests that the quality of leadership and management had improved in the majority of PtS schools following participation in SCC. The rate of progress was not consistent, with some PtS schools making greater progress than others relative to their starting point. The rate of progress appeared greater in Group A schools (which had further to go, having previously been in decline) than in schools in Group B (those that had been stable but underperforming) and Group C (where change had begun prior to SCC).

8.6 The question remains, however, as to whether PtS had contributed to the extent of progress made – and how it had done so. In practice, the contribution of programme-related inputs to improving the quality of leadership and management was quite variable. In the case of around one quarter of all PtS schools, programme-related inputs (particularly through regular, structured AIB meetings and help with data management and accountability) appeared almost wholly responsible for the identified changes. This was most evident in schools that had previously been in decline (Group A), where the contribution of PtS was credited, almost wholly, with the changes that had been made. The impact of the programme on leadership on the remaining schools was less evident and, in the case of around one-quarter, was felt to have made limited (if any) contribution.

8.7 SCC was thought to have made a less obvious contribution to improving leadership and management in schools that were in marginally less challenging circumstances at the outset. This may reflect some of the difficulties inherent in developing a more devolved leadership model. In many of the Group B and Group C schools, supporting improvements in the wider middle leadership team had become a priority, particularly in 2015/16. Exemplifying some of the challenges these schools faced, one Chair of Governors noted how the school had used the SCC funding to give department heads the opportunity to take on additional management responsibilities. However, while some staff had taken advantage of this PtS funded opportunity and developed their leadership skills and capacity, others had struggled, so progress remained uneven.

8.8 The Welsh Government's guidance highlighted the central role of Advisers in supporting improvements in leadership and management. However, according to interviewees in over two-thirds of all PtS schools, the biggest contributory SCC input was seen as the availability of funding. This is not surprising (as highlighted in Section 7), since the funding enabled plans to be put into action.

8.9 In a similar proportion of schools, interviewees felt that it was the existing leadership team, in particular the Headteacher, rather than the Adviser, that appeared most influential in driving improvements in the school. This raises the question, however, as to how much of the work of the Adviser was known (or was made known) to the wider staff body. Part of the rationale for PtS schools was capacity building amongst the SLT. In supporting the work of the Headteachers (many of whom had been recruited in the year prior to participation in SCC, or during the first year) some Advisers sought to be less visible in the school to make sure that the SLT were recognised for their development work.

8.10 As noted in Chapter 5, some school interviewees may not have been in a position to assess adequately the real contribution of Advisers, particularly where their time was spent supporting Headteachers. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the capacity of Advisers to effect change, particularly in those schools where senior leaders were less effective and had the potential to act as a barrier to further improvement. This issue was highlighted by one senior leader in a cluster primary school, who was a member of an AIB for one PtS schools. He observed that the meetings had revealed a Headteacher who was both unwilling to accept the need for change and reluctant to make the changes advocated by their Adviser. In this instance, he questioned whether the Adviser had sufficient authority to compel action where it was required and whether the impact of SCC had been lessened as a result.

8.11 In light of these findings, and acknowledging the positive contribution of SCC to supporting improvements in the quality of leadership and management in PtS schools, it is important to consider how the findings of the PtS approach could be built on for future school improvement strategies. In particular, Regional Consortia and the Welsh Government may wish to reflect on the extent to which more could be done to understand the quality and capacity of leadership and management in schools *prior* to their inclusion in any support programme. While Advisers were credited with enabling improvements in leadership in just over one-half of the PtS schools, for example, an initial analysis that highlighted leaders who had the potential to act as a break on improvement might have ensured that steps could be taken to mitigate their impact at the outset. Equally, the evaluation identified some schools where leadership and management was already a strength (frequently because of recent staff changes) and recognition of this might have led to a different allocation of programme-related inputs for such schools.

The contribution of SCC in supporting improvements in self-evaluation

8.12 The ability of a school to conduct self-evaluation is widely considered as ultimately dependent on the strength of school leaders and it is no surprise that progress in improving the quality of self-evaluation systems and processes was variable. Nonetheless, most schools (around three quarters) had made some discernible progress following inclusion within SCC. Again, the evidence to support this was largely qualitative, although there was supportive material in the logged acquisition of IT systems (such as data tracking software and IRIS) and training to support self-evaluation.

8.13 The evidence from interviewees suggests that, overall, the SCC made more of a contribution to supporting schools' ability to undertake self-evaluation than it did to enhancing school leadership and management. The activity of the school in instigating and operating self-evaluation strategies may have been more apparent to staff than the development of management skill in the SLT A particular contributory factor was said to be the introduction of AIBs. These were widely perceived as making a valuable contribution to school improvement, not least in providing the basis for a regular system of review and reflection on school performance (something that interviewees commented had not previously been in place or had not been a priority).

8.14 The AIB model was seen to have been most effective, however, in supporting self-evaluation in schools that had previously been stable but were under-performing (the Group B schools). Conversely, in the schools that had previously been in decline (Group A) and in the schools that had been improving (Group C schools) AIBs were thought to have been less effective in supporting self-evaluation. Instead, access to support from an Adviser (particularly in Group A schools) and the funding to support leadership training were cited more frequently by these schools as the key programme-related drivers behind improvement in this area.

8.15 Such findings prompt the question as to whether the AIB model is appropriate for all schools in need of improvement or whether a more graduated approach might have more of an impact. AIBs provided a valuable tool in supporting school self-evaluation, but they relied on a level of stability in school leadership, and a maturity in school-development planning that was not present in some of the Group A schools, for example, at the outset.

The contribution of SCC in supporting improvements in teaching quality

8.16 In all 39 PtS schools, a key element of self-evaluation activities was a commitment to monitoring the quality of teaching. As discussed in Chapter 3, there was evidence that programmes included common elements including lesson observations, book scrutiny and the monitoring of pupil progress data. However, it was widely acknowledged that, prior to SCC, there had been concern that such processes were not yielding reliable information. As noted by one senior leader in 2015/16: *'this year the proportion of lessons assessed as good or better has fallen but I think that, in reality, the quality of those lessons* [now] *assessed as unsatisfactory might have been* [assessed as] *good before'* (Senior leader in a PtS school).

8.17 In general, the contribution of PtS programme-related inputs in supporting improvements in teacher quality also appeared to be slightly greater than leadership and management. However, the variability observed in the level of contribution in individual schools means that this should be interpreted with caution. For instance, in just under one-fifth of all PtS schools the contribution of SCC appeared to have been negligible. Conversely, in two-fifths of all PtS schools programme-related inputs were perceived as largely responsible for any observed change in performance.

8.18 In order to explain some of this variability, it is helpful to consider those inputs that were most commonly associated with supporting changes in performance alongside the historic performance trajectory of schools prior to their inclusion in SCC. Notably, in three quarters of all PtS schools, access to SCC funding (which enabled schools to release teachers to attend CPD courses, for example) was commonly credited with supporting changes in teaching performance. In practice, such investments were often considered as contributing more to the changes in schools that had previously been declining (Group A) or coasting (Group B) rather than in schools that had already started to improve (Group C schools). Several factors appeared to underpin, this finding:

- In some Group A and Group B schools, there was evidence that, without SCC funding, senior leaders would not have been in a position to spend money on CPD or other such activities. In contrast, in some Group C schools there was evidence that such activities were already being resourced but that SCC funding had enabled senior leaders to increase their availability or frequency. As a result, SCC funding in Group A and Group B schools was considered more important in explaining changes in their performance than in Group C schools.

- In Group A and Group B schools there was evidence to suggest that the ways in which SCC funding had been used was somewhat different

to the way such funding had been used in Group C schools. Notably, in Group A and Group B schools the emphasis often appeared to be in supporting middle leaders to put in place appropriate systems and processes to support effective teaching. In Group C schools, funding was much more commonly used to support classroom teachers to implement the pedagogical approaches that middle leaders considered desirable. In these schools, in which SCC funding was welcomed, it was acknowledged that the success of training in supporting changes in classroom practice must be seen in the context of the development of effective middle leadership.

8.19 There is evidence that SCC in PtS schools has contributed both to the introduction of CPD and, in some cases, extended it. The question remains as to how transformational it has been. It is not clear whether the programme been running long enough to have led to school-wide cultural change in approaches to teaching and learning, for example, or whether it has primarily been of benefit only to those who have participated in CPD and performance-related activities.

The contribution of SCC in supporting improvements in levels of pupil engagement

8.20 There was some evidence of recent progress (over the 2015/16 academic year) in attendance in schools that had previously been struggling (Group A) as well as in schools that had been making progress (Group C). Attendance in the schools that had been stable but making no or limited progress prior to PtS (Group B), however, had not improved at the rate that might have been expected. Most interviewees, however, emphasised that improved attendance (while measurable) was not the best indicator of improvements in pupil engagement, emphasising the long lead-in time between introducing interventions (particularly for disaffected pupils) and observing improvements in aggregate data (rather than data on specific individuals).

8.21 Despite a small number of notable outliers, there was less variability in the assessed contribution of programme-related inputs in supporting improvements in levels of pupil engagement in PtS schools. The overall contribution of SCC to changes in the performance of PtS schools was assessed to be fairly strong (and slightly higher than in domains such as teacher quality and leadership and management). In two-fifths of all PtS schools inputs were considered to be largely or whole responsible for the observed change in pupil engagement. In a further quarter of all PtS schools, programme related inputs were considered as one of the main drivers.

8.22 Interestingly, in almost two-thirds of all PtS schools, the *only* programme-related input associated with changes in performance was SCC funding. This is not surprising given the extent to which PtS schools appear to have placed

the recruitment of support staff (such as attendance officers) as central to their approach to improving pupil engagement. It is, however, important to question the sustainability of perceived improvements once this source of funding is no longer available. Some schools were more optimistic than others noting that if the school was successful in improving attendance and ensuring that good attendance became the norm, then such levels of investment would not be required in the future. Others were less sanguine. As noted by one senior leader if good attendance was only maintained by the work of attendance officers and other support staff, then *'they will be faced with making a difficult decision about what else to stop funding'* (Senior Leader in a PtS school).

The contribution of SCC in supporting improvements in pupil learning outcomes

8.23 An analysis of pupil data over time showed that each of the PtS schools had made some progress in raising pupil attainment in Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 3, though this was particularly evident in schools where some progress was evident prior to the implementation of SCC (Group C). The extent to which that progress in attainment was on a par with (or better) than might be expected, given the characteristics of the pupils in the schools, varied, however.

8.24 In assessing the contribution of programme-related inputs in supporting improvements in pupil-level outcomes, there was less variability in the level of contribution than in other domains (such as leadership management). Despite the fact that few schools had focused on direct interventions with pupils, the SCC was widely perceived to have had more impact on pupil learning outcomes than on supporting improvements in teacher quality, but less of an impact it had on supporting improvements in pupil engagement.

8.25 This is perhaps less of a clear impact of SCC than a reflection that few interviewees in the PtS schools identified other school-improvement resources that they were setting aside to support activities aimed directly at improving pupil-learning outcomes. Interviewees, commonly, reflected on the complexity inherent in trying to improve pupil attainment and the need to take account of changes in a range of different areas of the school in trying to explain or attribute any change in performance (including changes in teacher quality, and levels of pupil engagement). Although investments in catch-up programmes were considered worthwhile, they were commonly considered as a contributory factor for the few rather than central to improving overall pupil attainment.

The contribution of SCC to overall improvements in PtS schools

8.26 In summary, SCC appears to have supported many improvements in PtS schools, though a range of other internal and external factors (including leadership) have played an important role. The evidence suggests that all PtS schools had made some progress over the two years and that SCC had been a contributory factor. This was particularly evident in relation to improvements in pupil engagement (with interviewees particularly highlighting the contribution of SCC funding in facilitating support staff roles) and partially to enhancements in leadership and management, teacher development and pupil attainment outcomes.

8.27 In all of these developments, SCC funding was identified as the dominant enabling feature, supporting improvements in staffing, in data management systems and staff training, for example. It is possible, however, that the importance of the Advisers (acknowledged as supporting leadership and management) was understated by many interviewees; staff outside schools' leadership teams appear to have been less aware of the work of the Advisers who were often less visible to the wider staff body.

8.28 Some of the noted improvements, such as those in overall teacher quality and in aspects of leadership and management (particularly of data systems) are likely to persist after funding ceases, particularly if staff remain in post. Some, however, such as dedicated staff posts to help support pupils at risk of disengaging, may be more vulnerable when funding ceases, raising issues of longer-term sustainability of the improvements noted.

8.29 The implications of the findings from the study are explored in Chapter 9.

9. Conclusions and implications

9.1 The evidence suggests that the approach adopted for PtS was appropriate for the 39 schools, in that it sought to tailor support specifically to meet the needs of individual institutions. Although schools tended to feel that SCC funding was the main factor in enabling improvements, there are indications that, depending on the areas for development, both Advisers and AIBs had a notable (though not always acknowledged) role to play. The PtS model facilitated changing levels of support as the programme developed, ensuring that schools were supported in taking ownership of their school improvement journey. In particular:

- The role of the Challenge Advisers varied from being directive to a more advisory role as schools progressed
- The AIBs evolved into bodies in which there was mutual accountability and provided scope for wider staff development.

9.2 Alongside the available external support (through funding, Challenge Advisers and AIBs) a number of internal factors contributed to the level of success achieved across the 39 PtS schools. These included:

- the relative strengths, skills and capacity of the SLT
- the ability of a school to carry out a detailed self-evaluation (and to identify the actions needed to address any areas needing improvement)
- the extent to which all staff (not just the SLT) saw school improvement as something for which they needed to take responsibility.

9.3 In taking forward a programme of school improvement, there is a need to consider not only the form and scale of available inputs, but also the contexts into which these inputs are going. This highlights the need to consider, in detail, the needs of schools (and whether there are needs that are common across all schools or whether there are unique circumstances that require a more tailored approach). It emphasises the importance of identifying the schools in need of support, diagnosing the kind of support needed, considering the level of improvement (whether in leadership, teaching quality or pupil outcomes) that might feasibly be expected over the timescale of the intervention and putting in place an appropriate action plan.

Implications for wider school improvement

9.4 A number of lessons, both strategic and operational, have been learned from the evaluation of PtS schools that are transferable to wider school improvement. At a strategic level:

- There is a need to review the synergy between school development planning and funding cycles. Where opportunities to apply for funds occur late in the school year, schools can struggle to integrate activities into the school development plan or to recruit staff to support those activities. Late confirmation of the availability of funds can also prevent good planning.

- Our analysis identified a high degree of volatility in the attainment patterns of the 39 schools in the five years prior to being designated as PtS schools. For some schools this volatility hid a long-term downward trend in attainment, for others it hid a more recent and gradual improvement. For effective school improvement strategies, clarity around longer-term trends could help support the identification of the schools in most need of support.

- In addition, further consideration of how data can be used best to assess school progress would be valuable. The forecasting model used in this evaluation proved an effective tool in developing an approach to consider how best to assess progress between different schools, in different circumstances, and where the intervention was tailored to need, not standardised. Considering not just prior attainment, but its trajectory, and including an examination of the characteristics of the pupil cohort profile, facilitated a more nuanced approach to assessing progress in PtS schools and could inform future evaluations.

- Many PtS schools needed external help in identifying their particular needs, their starting point for development and/or the appropriate phasing of school improvement activities. For some schools, the emphasis for support needed to be primarily on improving leadership and management, including developing school-wide action plans and an emphasis on the better use and management of data. For others, it needed to be more on enhancing teaching and learning in the school, widening the variety of pedagogies used and deepening the degree of challenge for pupils. For yet others, the focus needed to be mainly on implementing strategies that helped pupils to engage more with school and with their education. The network of Challenge Advisers and the introduction of the AIBs were central to providing this support, including developing schools' capacity for self-evaluation and longer-term consideration of such support mechanisms would be valuable.

9.5 At an operational level:

- A clear identification of the specific internal needs in schools, not just their context or levels of performance, is imperative to the development of a comprehensive and appropriate action plan. The role of the Challenge Adviser was instrumental in the relative improvement of many of the PtS schools, helping them to conceptualise their needs and put in place a plan of action that could be implemented in the school
- Where external support is brought in, it is essential that a productive relationship is developed with the SLT, so that they are willing to consider transformative action
- Good relationships are more likely to occur when the external adviser has relevant skills and experience; an adviser with secondary experience is more likely to be credible to the SLT in a secondary school than one from a primary background
- External advisers need to be able to spend sufficient time in schools, and with the relevant staff, if their contribution is to be valued and acted upon
- Involving middle leaders, as well as senior leaders, in school development is essential to develop ownership of the approach and to support succession planning
- While the development of good leadership and management is important, the ability of a school to undertake self-evaluation (and act upon it) is critical for improvement
- School improvement needs to be seen as a collaborative journey, involving not just the SLT, but also middle leaders and other staff, in order to develop a shared sense of ownership and agreed activity
- Partnership working with other schools takes time to develop and evolve into an active relationship. The introduction of AIBs supported the collaborative approach, evolving into a place of mutual accountability. Collaborative working with other schools, on mutually agreed issues or areas of the curriculum were becoming more common, but by no means universal, towards the end of the two years.
- Pupils may have many reasons for poor school attendance or lack of progress. Overcoming their barriers to learning may be critical to improving their engagement in school, and creative use of support staff may need to go alongside curriculum-based activities. .

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