

# Report

## Scrutiny Meeting

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### Part 1

Date: 3 November 2021

Item No:

**Subject** Education Achievement Service (EAS) - Value for Money 2020-21

**Purpose** Newport City Council are a partner local authority of the EAS Regional School Improvement Service. This paper describes the outcomes of an external report on the Value for Money (VfM) of the Regional Service in 2020/21.

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**Ward** All

**Summary** The VFM report for 2020-2021 (Appendix A) focusses on the delivery of the regional service and the regional impact set against a number of criteria. Members will note that the report does not break down individual LA detail. The report has been written by an external consultant, Rod Alcott following a competitive tender process. This is the fourth year that this consultant has reviewed the VfM of the EAS. In the context of operating in the unique circumstances of a global pandemic and in the absence of the usual measures of effectiveness then considerations of effectiveness have had to be re-thought. The most valid measure now becomes a consideration of the extent to which EAS achieved what it set out to do in response to the unique set of circumstances under which it was operating

**Proposal** Members are requested to:

- Receive the report for information

**Action by** The Education Achievement Service in partnership with the LA

**Timetable** This is an annual report reflecting on the previous Business Plan year.

This report was prepared after consultation with:

- Sarah Morgan (Chief Education Officer)

**Signed**

## Background and Report

- 1.1. The VFM report for 2020-2021 (Appendix A) focusses on the delivery of the regional service and the regional impact set against a number of criteria. Members will note that the report does not break down individual LA detail.
- 1.2. On the request of the EAS Company Board an external tender was advertised to attract alternate consultants to complete this work. Despite this tender process only one consultant applied to undertake the work. This was Rod Alcott, the tender was awarded to him to complete the review.
- 1.3. The report has been written by an external consultant, Rod Alcott. The report has been sectioned into the following aspects:
  - Executive Summary
  - Recommendations
  - Economy and Efficiency– Spending less and spending well
  - Equity – Spending fairly
  - Effectiveness – Spending wisely
  - Sustainability – Spending for the long term
  - Conclusion
- 1.4. The full content of the regional school improvement VfM 2020/2021 report can be found in Appendix A.
- 1.5. The report notes that: In the context of operating in the unique circumstances of a global pandemic and in the absence of the usual measures of effectiveness then considerations of effectiveness have to be re-thought. The most valid measure now becomes a consideration of the extent to which EAS achieved what it set out to do in response to the unique set of circumstances under which it was operating.
- 1.6. The exceptional circumstances within which the EAS operated throughout 2020-2021 means that an evaluation of VfM must be re-thought. This re-thinking means that:
  - considerations of economy and efficiency are best conflated into a single judgement;
  - sustainability centres around the extent to which revised ways of working can be continued in the future;
  - equity becomes an even more significant consideration given the well documented disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils; and
  - effectiveness places a greater focus on well-being and becomes essentially a judgement on the extent to which schools and staff felt well-supported.
- 1.7. While the current context provides a particular set of challenges it does not deflect from an approach centred around answering the basic VfM questions of:
  - Are you doing the right things?

- How well are you doing them? (economy and efficiency)
- Are you promoting fairness? (equity)
- What impact are you having? (effectiveness)
- Is your approach sustainable? (sustainability)

- 1.8. It must be recognised that the above questions are inextricably linked. There is a need to recognise that interventions that are being implemented economically and efficiently are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for demonstrating VfM. Interventions may be being implemented very well but if they are not the right interventions then impact will not be maximised and effectiveness – the cornerstone of VfM - will not be achieved.
- 1.9. One of the advantages of couching the questions in the above format is that they provide a possible framework for, or approach to, VfM that staff can integrate into their on-going or summative evaluation of their work. Arguably these are questions that sit more readily with reflection on performance than more formal and less widely used terms such as economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 1.10. The value from a VfM review lies in part in the assurance that it can provide to both providers and recipients of services. However, it can be argued that a greater added value comes from the extent to which it acts as a catalyst for improvement, based on an evaluation of a body of evidence that demonstrates what is working well and what is working less well. This in turn can lead to well informed judgements about what needs to change.
- 1.11. If one accepts the approach and underlying assumptions outlined above, then the next consideration was how to gather the necessary evidence to make a valid evaluation of VfM. However, it must be recognised that evidence gathering and analysis for this report took place in the wholly exceptional circumstances of the lockdown imposed to combat the Coronavirus pandemic. Consequently, it was an exercise undertaken entirely remotely. While this caused some inevitable logistical challenges and delays in reporting, it did not affect the quality of evidence gathered or impair the validity of subsequent findings and conclusions.
- 1.12. This VfM review drew upon information and data supplied by EAS in response to requests, evidence from external experts who have undertaken work for EAS during the year 2019-20. The unique circumstances of operating during a global pandemic meant that the question that this VfM review had to answer in order to come to an overall judgement was:

*How successful was the EAS in responding to the pandemic to mitigate the impact on schools, learners and its own workforce?*

## **Conclusion**

- 1.13. Consideration of the body of evidence provided to this review enabled a judgement to be made regarding VfM and the judgement is that:

*EAS continues to provide good VfM in terms of the services it provides, as evidenced by its successful mitigation of the impact of the pandemic on schools, learners and its own workforce*

1.14. This conclusion was arrived at because:

- **Economy and Efficiency – spending less and spending well.** The EAS has increased the capacity and credibility of the school improvement offer while reducing the cost of delivering it and maintaining one of the highest delegation rates to schools of any consortium in Wales.
- **Equity – spending fairly.** The EAS has mitigated the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners through the provision of a range of services designed to promote wellbeing and minimise the, often disproportionate, impact on these young people.
- **Effectiveness– spending wisely.** The EAS has provided flexible and responsive support that has contributed positively to the wellbeing of staff both within schools and its own workforce.
- **Sustainability – spending for the long term.** In response to the pandemic the EAS has devised an alternative approach to service provision that is sustainable from both a financial and human resource perspective.

1.15. The full report in Appendix A details the evidence that underpins these judgements.

## **Recommendations**

1.16. The profound impact of the pandemic on working practices means that there was little or no opportunity for the EAS to implement the recommendation that was made last year. In anticipation of the year 2021-2022 seeing something of a return to more 'normal' working it would appear sensible to re-iterate the recommendation as follows:

- The EAS needs to build upon its evolving approach to considering VfM through:
  - on-going refinement of its internal reporting mechanisms;
  - further developing its mid-year review of VfM; and
  - extending engagement with recipients of its services to triangulate evidence and further validate findings and conclusions.
- The pandemic has shown that positive change is and has been possible. Schools, settings and the EAS have seized opportunities to explore innovative ways of working and delivering meaningful learning experiences through a creative blended learning approach.
  - The EAS needs to reflect and build upon on the lessons learned from the positive approach that has been developed during this time.
- The EAS needs to ensure that:
  - recommendations from the IIP report are implemented and their effectiveness evaluated through a staff survey;
  - responses are compared to those from the survey undertaken as part of the accreditation process; and
  - future people management processes are refined to reflect the survey outcomes.

## **2. Resource Implications**

- 2.1 There are no specific resource implications, but resource decisions already taken are considered within the report.

## **3. Consultation**

3.1. The Consultees are noted below:

- Directors of Education (within South East Wales)
- Regional Joint Executive Group (JEG)
- Individual local authority education scrutiny committees

## **4. Background Papers**

- 4.1 The South-East Wales Regional Value for Money Report (2020-2021) attached as Appendix A.