

Enabling a self-improving system – a collaborative model between schools, LAs and Welsh Government – Draft guidance (June 2024)

This document has been written to provide local authorities (“LA”) and school leaders with guidance on the arrangements for school improvement following the publication of the report on the ‘Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements’. It is a draft document, to support discussions with local authorities as we move towards 2025/26. We will take comments on the document and share an updated version in September 2024.

This document sets out further guidance on the expectations of the first 2 workstreams in the report:

- Supporting school-to-school working at a local level
- Supporting school-to-school collaboration and networking across local authorities

Further detail will be published by September on the role of the national capacity in supporting this agenda (the third workstream proposed by the review).

This draft guidance sets out:

- The emerging importance of *collaborative improvement* and *collective responsibility* in raising standards.
- A fresh approach to self-evaluation and improvement based on the above principles and driven by professional agency and effective collaboration.
- Roles and responsibilities/expectations for schools and LAs.

The document is supported by a template (Doc 1) which is intended to support LAs in planning for the transition to the new arrangements for supporting school improvement. The template includes a series of questions for LAs to consider. We recognise that local authorities and schools will all be at different starting points and there is a need for a differentiated and graduated approach as we move towards the ambitions of this guidance. The attached template will allow local authorities to outline their own individual journey. This template will form the basis of informal discussions between Welsh Government officials and LAs mid-July. The table sets out the next steps:

Date	Output	Lead
June	Draft guidance circulated - <i>A collaborative model between schools, LAs and Welsh Government.</i>	Welsh Government
July	Informal discussions with every LA based on the template which accompanies this guidance – available at Doc 1 All comments on the guidance itself should be received by end July 2024	Welsh Government and partner team
September	Further detail on the functions of national capacity issued* Updated guidance and template based on feedback	Welsh Government

End October	Final submission of LA plans based on the template	LAs
End 2024	Consultation on the revised School Improvement guidance which will build on the outcomes of this SIPP process	Welsh Government

**The detail provided by the guidance on national capacity will have some implications for LAs in terms of the scope and nature of national support and functions in key areas. However, this detail is unlikely to impact on the contents of this document, which will remain our core vision and requirements.*

1 Context

Recent publications including Estyn reports, PISA and the personalised assessments national report, have identified **a need to improve the quality of learning and outcomes within and across schools, and the consistency of this across Wales for ALL learners**. We need to bring together our work on ALN and curriculum, underpinned by our commitment to equity for all learners as we unite behind our national mission to achieve high standards and aspirations or all by tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment and supporting every learner.

The 'Review of School Improvement: roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales' ('the Review') focussed on key areas that needed to be changed to enable this improvement.

The Review noted that school leaders feel overwhelmed by the amount of change in the education system in Wales system which they felt was compounded by a lack of clarity about national reforms in some key areas like curriculum and ALN. They saw many of the requests from the middle tier as being unnecessary, counter-productive and adding bureaucracy. As a result, they sought clarity about the roles and impact of all elements within the middle tier.

School leaders feel a lack of ownership of their school's own improvement agenda as reflected in the conclusions from the Review:

'there was a lot of concern about a culture of 'done to' rather than 'done with'. Concerns about the variability and lack of consistency in the quality of support... was also often noted. They saw many of the requests from the middle tier as being unnecessary, counter-productive and adding bureaucracy'.

The Review proposed school leaders as the agents of improvement in learning, so that they feel more empowered and have more agency over their own improvement journey.

Reflecting on the strength and consistency of opinion the Review suggested that the future school improvement infrastructure should:

- give school leaders an opportunity to lead on school improvement matters through a greater focus on local collaboration and partnership working between school leaders and their LA
- develop partnerships between more than one LA
- establish stronger national leadership with clearer national priorities for schools and a simplification of the national funding mechanisms with as much resource as possible going directly to schools or supporting groups of schools to work together.

2. Aims and Objectives

The aim of this policy is to support the system in collectively raising educational standards in Wales as we mature into a self-improving system.

This guidance sets out Welsh Government policy expectations for a new, school-to-school collaborative approach to self-evaluation and improvement: it should be rooted within an open culture, with collective responsibility between LAs, schools and groups of schools. The Schools in Wales as learning organisations model sets out the key characteristics to deliver this culture.

The policy aims to:

- i. Improve the quality of leadership and teaching and learning by embedding and enabling deep and purposeful collaborative improvement and collective responsibility as the foundations of the school improvement model.
- ii. Develop an open, supportive culture which enables self-evaluation to become a mechanism for improving schools and the wider school system, rather than as a compliance exercise within an accountability system.
- iii. Enable LAs to create a local collaborative improvement infrastructure which allows all schools and LAs to:
 - a. improve the quality of self-evaluation and improvement within schools, where high-quality collaborative working, active professional learning and enquiry, and effective peer support and challenge are central.
 - b. continue to develop a shared understanding of progression and expectations for learning.
 - c. develop a more authentic, collective understanding of local priorities.
- iv. Enable school leaders and LAs to focus time and energy on building, and releasing, school-based capacity to support local system improvement.
- v. Enable LAs to work in partnership with each other and Welsh Government to ensure evidence based good practice is shared systematically.
- vi. Provide a supportive national infrastructure to ensure local improvement intelligence informs national priorities.

3. Our school improvement model: a new school-to-school collaborative approach to self-evaluation and improvement

Our aim is that all parts of the school system see self-evaluation as a mechanism for improving individual schools and the wider school system. The purpose is to focus improvement activity on the things that will have the greatest impact on our learners.

A summary of our model:

- As the starting point, schools should lead their own self-evaluation and improvement planning process in an iterative way (rather than as a one-off event); this should be a process which is supported by the local authority and other schools.
- All schools will be part of a vertical collaborative improvement model (3-16 and beyond) and a horizontal collaborative improvement model (e.g. secondary to secondary) further details below. This will enable leaders and teachers to engage with learning and leadership in other schools - supporting a collective understanding of expectations for learning and progression and enabling long-term, precise improvement priorities to be identified and addressed.
- LAs, in partnership with school leaders, will facilitate and provide support to each collaborative, identifying and drawing on expertise and evidence, along with wider LA services as they collectively seek to tackle barriers to learning at the earliest possible stage.
- LAs work with other LAs and the national school improvement capacity to ensure system-wide evidence-based approaches to improvement, allowing a more cohesive effort to achieving our national mission.

3.1 Role of the individual school

School leaders and their governing bodies will remain accountable for improving learning within their own school. All schools should have honest, robust, evidence-based self-evaluation arrangements in place, building on the range of information and evidence available, as part of their strategic improvement process.

Schools will focus on 2 key questions as a starting point for their improvement activities:

1. Are learners progressing in the ways described in the principles of progression, supporting them to develop towards the four purposes?
2. Is the pace of learners' progress in line with the expectations of teachers and the curriculum?

A range of information and evidence will be needed to inform a school's evaluation around these questions, but no school should tackle these questions in isolation. In developing their collective understanding of progression and expectations for learning, schools should ensure that practitioners have sufficient support and challenge from within and beyond their own school. Working through an enquiry-focused self-evaluation process within a deep and purposeful collaborative

arrangement with other schools can allow leaders and practitioners to really understand:

- *How well are we doing?*
- *How do we know?*
- *How can we improve?*

3.2 Collaborative improvement

Collaborative improvement should be viewed as the most effective way to secure sustainable change within schools, across groups of schools, and across local authorities; **this should be focused on improving learning and outcomes for all learners**. This approach will lead to improved **teaching and learning, leadership, and equity, inclusion and wellbeing** by building collective capacity and understanding within the local system.

To achieve this, school leaders and practitioners should work in partnership with each other and their LA within an open, trusting environment. This will enable active professional learning, ensuring that first-hand evidence of learning and leadership are seen and shared, supported by rigorous professional dialogue.

We expect this to create a collaborative culture which will enable precise improvement priorities to be identified and expertise, skills and capacity to be shared, securing long term sustainable improvement. (See Annex 1).

We define collaborative improvement in two dimensions:

3.2.1 “Vertical Collaboration” - schools should work collaboratively within their locality to ensure that all learners are able to progress along the 3-16 continuum and beyond.

Schools and LAs should consider opportunities for collective solutions to tackle local issues. Long-term strategies should be put in place to address those local 3-16 challenges, tackling barriers to learning at the earliest stage possible (including disadvantage, ALN, behaviour and attendance).

Vertical collaboration is also fundamental in ensuring an inclusive and coherent curriculum and facilitating progression for all learners, particularly at key transition points. Central to this, will be the development of a shared understanding of progression and expectation for learning along the 3-16 continuum.

3.2.2 “Horizontal collaboration”, Schools should work in partnership to develop collaborative evaluation and improvement planning with schools which have learners in the same age range (for example a secondary school working with other secondary schools.) Central to this form of collaborative improvement is the development of a shared understanding of progression and expectations for learning which underpins effective self-evaluation and enables precise improvement priorities to be identified and implemented. (Please note that horizontal collaboration may need to operate across LAs to enable similar settings to work within the same sector e.g. Welsh medium, faith, special, PRU/EOTAS)

3.2.3 Expectations for deep and purposeful collaborative improvement

Schools and LAs will need to create an open culture of collaborative enquiry, innovation and exploration, to develop an evidence-based understanding of improvement priorities, ensuring that those priorities are sufficiently refined and specific. To enable this, we would expect school collaboratives, within a trusting and supportive environment, to:

- Share with each other the information and evidence relating to their individual improvement journey.
- Facilitate and participate in active professional learning where leaders and practitioners from other schools, along with the LA, can provide effective and reciprocal support and challenge.

This will lead to effective triangulation by allowing for purposeful professional dialogue around first-hand evidence of learning and leadership within a wider range of evidence and information. The above will also enable the LA to understand the underlying barriers to learning so that the wider services of the authority can support schools to tackle those barriers.

3.3 Collective Responsibility

To enable effective collaborative improvement, the system should be driven by the notion of **collective responsibility**. At local level the LA and schools should be collectively addressing local improvement. All schools should act in the best interests of all learners along the 3-16 continuum (and beyond).

Whilst school leaders and their governing bodies will remain accountable for improving learning within their own school, they should also feel collectively responsible for improving learning in other schools/settings. The LA should work in partnership with school leaders to build capacity, skills and expertise across schools within a culture where the whole local system has a commitment to the shared goal of raising standards and improving the educational experience of all learners.

LAs should apply the same principle across LA boundaries in its work with other LAs. These partnerships should be rooted in the notion of collective responsibility and be aimed at improving the standards, provision and experience for all learners in Wales.

3.3.1 Local Improvement Community

In partnership with local school/system leaders, LAs should plan and implement their strategies for improvement according to the needs of the local system and local communities. Working strategically with school leaders around key priorities, which are aimed at improving learning, should facilitate opportunities for building and sharing capacity.

This process should also allow LAs to develop a clear understanding of where they might require additional support and capacity. It will also help LAs to identify areas of strength for sharing with others and consolidate and consider local improvement priorities as part of their own self-evaluation processes. *See Annex 2 for an illustrative example.*

4. What are the benefits of this model?

For the learner:

A collaborative model should ensure greater equity for our learners through the realisation of *collective responsibility*; a system which values the unique contribution of every learner on their 3-16 journey. A culture of learning and improvement, where everyone shares high expectations of themselves and others will help us nurture young people who are better prepared for their next-steps post-compulsory education. Learners should experience a seamless transition along the 3-16 continuum and beyond which feels inclusive and supportive; this can be best achieved within a system which is rooted in deep and purposeful collaboration. This collaborative approach, rooted in the principle of collective responsibility, will also help us to tackle the impact of poverty on learners, their families, and their wider communities.

For the school:

A collaborative model offers numerous benefits that contribute to educational improvement and professional growth; it enhances teaching practice by enriching professional learning and dialogue. This fosters knowledge sharing, innovative teaching methods, and the exchange of best practices. Collaboration can nurture a shift to a more enquiry-based culture within and between schools. Collaborative arrangements can also involve shared leadership capacity and thus schools will benefit from shared strategic thinking, planning, and expertise. Greater agency is given to professionals at all levels within the system.

For the local authority:

In the proposed new collaborative improvement model, LAs will have first-hand evidence of learning and leadership processes in each school and across schools, through participating in and listening to school collaborative work. They will establish an in-depth collective understanding of local improvement needs and will be able to develop a more informed approach to brokering improvement strategies, school-to-school support and professional learning.

By building collective capacity, LAs will be able to support improvement and succession planning through schools sharing with and learning from others.

We expect the model of collaborative improvement will allow LAs and school leaders to build their ownership and collective responsibility for improvement and bring about the change in culture we are seeking.

5. Developing a local school improvement system - roles and responsibilities of schools, local authorities and partnerships

Our overall aim is to realise a self-improving system by delivering a fundamental change in culture so that **school leaders and practitioners** feel empowered and have more agency over their own improvement.

5.1 For all schools, we expect headteachers and governing bodies to:

- Develop a shared vision for how the school should improve in accordance with the National Improvement Framework (Annex 3) - a vision that has collaborative improvement and collective responsibility at its core. This vision should be well-understood and shared by staff, stakeholders, and local schools.
- Develop an open, supportive learning culture in partnership with the local authority - building on the [Professional Standards for teaching and leadership](#) and the [Schools in Wales as learning organisations](#) model.
- Secure a culture of high expectations, within a shared understanding of expectations for learning, well-understood by all staff and stakeholders.
- Establish an open culture of enquiry, innovation and exploration, in partnership with other schools, to develop an evidence-based understanding of their school's improvement priorities, ensuring that those priorities are sufficiently refined and specific.
- Through vertical and horizontal collaboration, and in partnership with the LA, take an active lead in providing and receiving support to address the precise improvement priorities identified, sharing expertise, skills and capacity in a structured way.
- Work collaboratively with other schools to ensure that they are effectively evaluating the impact of improvement strategies on pupil outcomes – providing necessary capacity to support, and ensuring that no groups of learners are left behind.

Please note:

WG will provide national professional learning to support those involved in school improvement (school leaders and LA staff) to develop their approach to operating as advisors and facilitators, in line with this model of supported collaborative improvement. Once established, it is envisaged that this professional learning should be undertaken by:

- all LA staff involved in supporting schools with self-evaluation and improvement;
- at least one member of the senior leadership team in each secondary school;
- at least one member of the leadership teams across the cluster / collaborative partnership of primary schools (special/PRUs/EOTAS)

Governing bodies should also:

- Enable their leaders and practitioners to support collaborative improvement by actively participating within collaborative arrangements and where appropriate, supporting school leaders to act as local system leaders.
- Consider their own arrangements for working with other governing bodies to support collective responsibility and collaborative improvement.

5.2 We expect local authorities to:

- Agree a collective vision with school leaders to improve their schools in accordance with the National Improvement Framework (Annex 3) - a vision that has collaborative improvement and collective responsibility at its core.
- Create a culture of high expectations, with shared understanding of expectations for learning, which is well-understood by all schools and stakeholders and which ensures that all learners can make progress.
- Empower school collaboratives (both vertical and horizontal) to develop an open culture of enquiry, innovation and exploration to enable precise improvement priorities to be identified.
- Actively promote and support the growth of local system leadership by providing school leaders, as appropriate, with opportunities to lead collaborative improvement and to work at strategic level in partnership with LAs.
- Build school-based expertise to support local system improvement as required.
- Carefully consider the ongoing role of Improvement Partner or School Improvement Advisor, which is likely to remain a critical one within the local system. We expect their focus to shift to working with the collaborative groups (vertical and horizontal) by playing more of a facilitative and supportive role in developing effective school-to-school collaborative improvement.
- Develop, in partnership with school leaders and practitioners, an authentic and comprehensive understanding of local improvement priorities to inform local and national priorities (Annex 1)

Local Authorities remain responsible for using their statutory intervention powers as outlined in the Schools Causing Concern Guidance

Local authorities should continue to use the information and intelligence available to them to identify schools causing concern and provide any bespoke support. In these cases, the Improvement Partner or School Improvement Advisor may play a more direct role in brokering or providing support directly to individual schools.

6. Partnership working between local authorities

We expect that all local authorities will work in partnership with other local authorities to deliver school improvement support. These partnerships will be agreed on a voluntary basis between local authorities.

There are broadly two types of partnership we expect to see between local authorities.

- The first will be partnerships between local authorities coming together to deliver support services to schools to make best use of resources. The key argument for delivering services in this way is likely to be economies of scale and the ability to access a wider pool of more specialist skills and resources. These partnerships will also allow for collaborative working between schools to cross local authority boundaries which may be important to meet the needs of their provision and their learners and communities (e.g. Welsh medium, faith, special schools, PRU/EOATS). This type of partnership working between local authorities may also be important in brokering bespoke professional learning support for schools or drawing down the national professional learning offer. This type of operational partnership may also involve sharing of staff to improve capacity and achieve efficiencies.
- The second type of partnerships between local authorities might be more specific and time limited and be aimed more at sharing learning, expertise and school-based capacity across local authorities on key issues and topics.

7. Role of Welsh Government (WG) and next steps for governance and inspection

As set out in the objectives section and illustrated within Annex 1, the policy should allow WG to be better informed of school and local priorities which can inform, and ensure better alignment with, our national priorities.

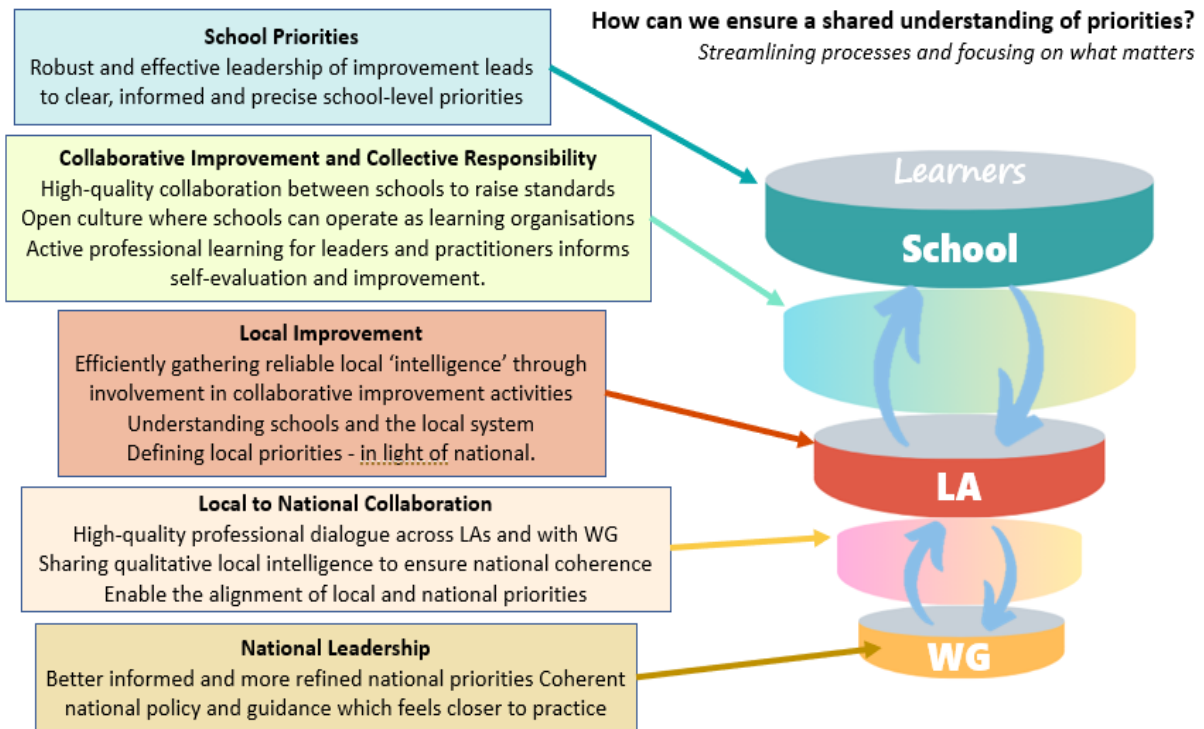
Collaborative improvement at all levels of the system will lead to greater national coherence and ultimately provide a better foundation for raising educational standards for the benefits of all learners.

Centred around the National Improvement Framework (annex 3), and focused on improving leadership, teaching and learning, and wellbeing, inclusion and equity, robust and effective two-way professional dialogue can ensure that **local** improvement priorities are embedded in developing **national** priorities for support and professional learning.

We recognise that the individualised structure of the current system can be a barrier to collaborative improvement and collective responsibility. WG will continue to consider and engage with stakeholders around how governance arrangements will support this agenda over the long-term. We will also work with Estyn to consider the implications of this guidance for their inspection framework.

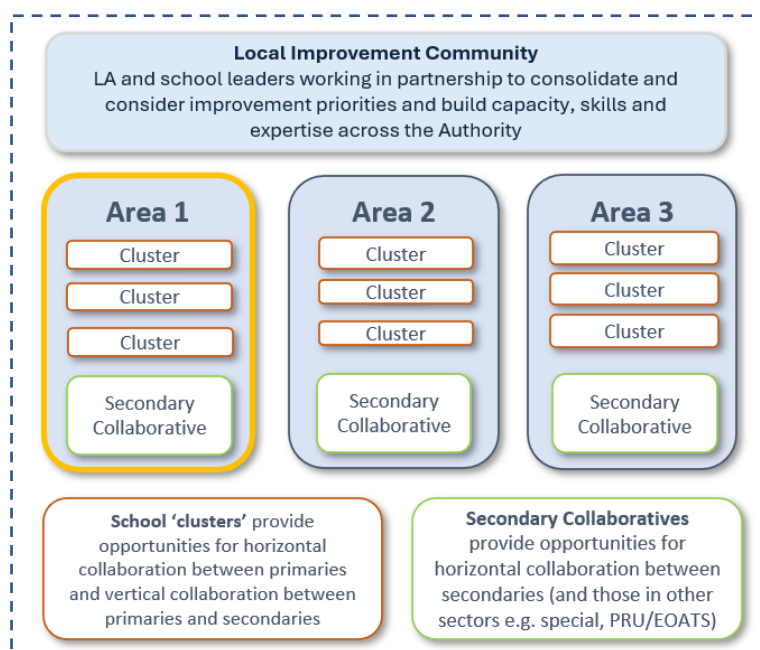
WG will set out in September the role of the national capacity to support the above.

Annex 1: How can we ensure a shared understanding of priorities?

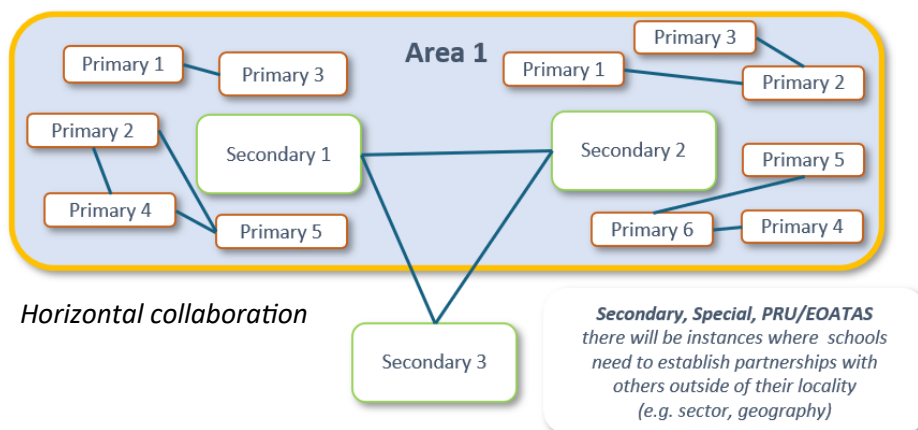


Annex 2: How might collaborative arrangements develop within a LA?

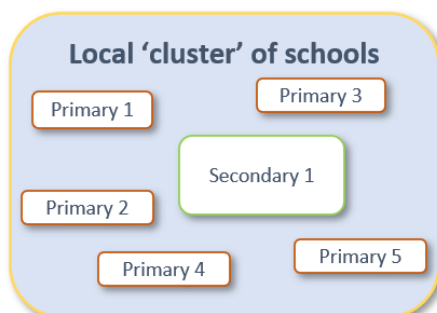
Example



Horizontal collaboration should allow schools with learners of a similar age range to explore learning, leadership and wellbeing together. A key component of this collaborative improvement work will be that leaders and practitioners are given the opportunity to see first-hand evidence beyond their own institution. Collectively, they should consider their expectations for learner progress and attainment, ensuring sufficient stretch and challenge across schools.



Horizontal collaboration



Vertical collaboration should allow schools to work locally. They will focus on local priorities and ensure effective transition for all learners along the 3-16 continuum and to post-16. This work should result in local schools having a clear understanding of any barriers that exist for learners, which they can tackle collectively.

The word 'cluster' is used here for ease of reference, although it is not a term used universally across Wales.

Annex 3:

SI Guidance: the National Improvement Framework

