

APPENDIX 9

SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

NOTES

INTERVIEW WITH MR HUW FOSTER EVANS, CHIEF OFFICER, GwE (Regional School Effectiveness & Improvement Service for North Wales)

5 September 2013

Present: Councillors Beth Lawton, Siôn Wyn Jones, Liz Saville Roberts and Dyfrig Siencyn.

Officers: Arwel Ellis Jones (Senior Manager Corporate Commission Service), Huw Rowlands (Assistant Performance Improvement Officer), Glynda O'Brien (Members and Scrutiny Support Officer)

Mr Huw Foster Evans was welcomed and he was thanked for agreeing to meet the members of the Quality of Education Scrutiny Investigation by Councillor Liz Saville Roberts. He was congratulated on his appointment as the Chief Officer of the new body, GwE. She explained that the purpose of the investigation, in accordance with the request from the Cabinet Member for Education, was to ascertain:

- (i) Why did polarisation occur in the KS4 performance of schools?
- (ii) Achievement standards in Mathematics and the impact of this on the TL2+ indicator
- (iii) Why were the quality standards and KS3 provision generally robust across all the authority's schools?
- (iv) Nurture a fuller understanding of the performance of pupils receiving free school meals and the degree in which the achievement of the groups of learners has an impact on KS4
- (v) The relevance of the free school meals indicator to identify rural deprivation
- (vi) The impact of leadership on the performance of schools and the way leadership skills are nurtured and developed.

1. GwE's Function

Mr Evans thanked the Members for the opportunity to meet them, and emphasised that as he had only been in post for three days that he would attempt to answer their questions to the best of his ability. Mr Evans explained that GwE was an arms-length body of the North Wales Consortium which had been commissioned by six authorities (Conwy, Denbigh, Flint, Gwynedd, Anglesey and Wrexham) to improve schools.

2. North Wales Consortium

These six authorities collaborate as the North Wales Consortium, which is an expression of the authorities' desire to undertake their work while respecting local culture, language and

accountability. Within the Consortium a strategic group has been established which includes the six North Wales Directors of Education and Anwen Williams as the Strategic Coordinator. Six sub-groups have been established within the Consortium with each of the Directors of Education leading the specific groups:

- Performance and Sustainability Sub-group
- Schools Effectiveness Sub-group
- Welfare and Partnerships Sub-group
- Finance and Resources Sub-group
- ITC and Data Sub-group
- Welsh Medium and Building Inclusivity Sub-group (under the leadership of Mr Dewi Jones, Head of Education, Gwynedd Council)

3. Service Level Agreement

A service level agreement had been established between the six authorities and GwE, effective between April 2013 and March 2014, which is identical for the six authorities. According to the formula, Gwynedd will pay 18% of the cost of funding the service.

The agreement prescribes in detail the service that GwE must provide, and therefore its functions are fairly restricted. When the agreement is renewed, there will be another opportunity to discuss the nature of GwE's services, following the lessons learnt from the experiences of the service's first year.

4. GwE's Role and Structure

GwE's role will be to monitor, challenge, intervene if required, and support schools, and it was emphasised that the six authorities will all have different aspirations. It was further emphasised that GwE is different to CYNNAL, and Mr Evans' personal feeling was that the level of the challenge had increased, and that there would be more targeting, supporting and intervention in schools where necessary in order to work in partnership with schools and raise the attainment level of pupils. There would be no universal support, and this could be a cause for concern. GwE would therefore need to encourage and increase the schools' abilities to bring about change for themselves.

GwE will offer a service to 466 schools with a budget of £3.5m, and a structure of 30 System Leaders located in the administrative centres for the following regions. It was noted that 19 out of the 30 System Leaders were Welsh speakers, with the original agreement stating that 16 must be bilingual. It was added that the recruitment and language policy depended on the operational location, which would be one of the following centres:

- Anglesey and Gwynedd
- Conwy and Denbighshire
- Wrexham and Flint

The six authorities had provided a budget of £250,000 for additional support for schools that required it, and it must be ensured that the funding was spent in a balanced manner, such as employing an individual with a successful track-record to work on a specific brief with schools.

Three Senior System Leaders had been appointed, acting as the Chief Officer's deputies. Mr Elfyn Vaughan Jones had been appointed Senior System Leader for Gwynedd and Anglesey, with 11 System Leaders to assist him.

In accordance with the service level agreement, each school will receive three monitoring visits (6 working days for each school through visits, preparation of reports, etc.) by the System Leaders, which corresponds to 55% of GwE services. It was further explained that if a school has been categorised by ESTYN as requiring special measures, that school would qualify for additional support from GwE. It was noted that approximately 88% of the service's time had been allocated, with the remaining percentage to be shared to deal with pre-inspection visits.

Mr Evans noted that ESTYN had consulted over the summer period with local education authorities regarding changing the inspection cycle. Under the current arrangements, schools were inspected every six years, and the theme of the consultation was to develop a more flexible risk-based system, which would mean inevitably that schools must be ready for an inspection at all times.

In relation to the schools banding system, it was confirmed that the Welsh Government's Standards Unit was driving this agenda, not ESTYN.

In response to an enquiry regarding the targeting of schools on the basis of risk, Mr Evans noted that the statutory role for schools remained with the local education authority, and that GwE would categorise schools, and report back on their performance to the local authority. It was emphasised that the six Directors of Education had the ultimate power to intervene in Governing Bodies. GwE would report to governors, and if the governing body did not accept a particular judgement, then further discussions would be held with the local education authority. Assurance was given that the Senior System Leader for Anglesey and Gwynedd would meet regularly with the local education authority team to discuss findings.

Further explanation was given on this term's process, to request Headteachers to provide self-evaluations of their latest outcomes for 2013, and to ascertain whether they have identified priorities. It was emphasised that challenging was essential, and therefore Headteachers' performance management must include target setting (as part of the three visits), to be reviewed by the governors. Directors of Education would have the right to see copies of the performance management targets of each Headteacher, and ESTYN would also be entitled to request them. It was felt that setting targets was a more powerful tool as it related to individuals and to Headteachers' salaries. It was noted that the local authority would deal with any instances of underperformance by Headteachers.

The Members of the Investigation felt that the link with governors regarding performance management was weak and that it should be strengthened. In response, Mr Evans said that it was not yet clear how the System Leaders Team would report on performance to the Governing Boards, and in his opinion this link was crucial to improving schools. Discussions

must be held with the System Leaders to ascertain their response in this respect. From GwE's perspective, it was felt that a formal report should be submitted to the full governing body and given due attention, and that the Chair of the governing body should prioritise this report. If a governing body was seen to be underperforming, then GwE could commission work with the governors.

It was noted that the recruitment of Headteachers was a problem as there was no incentive to undertake the post from the perspective of the difference in salary between Deputies / teachers considering the additional responsibilities of Headteachers.

5. Attainment Standards in Mathematics

In the context of the Quality of Education Scrutiny Investigation, reference was made to the concern regarding standards of attainment in Mathematics and its impact on the TL2+ indicator. Mr Evans acknowledged that Mathematics was problematic in almost all schools, and was not a weakness within Gwynedd only. This was discussed with the Senior System Leader, and it was obvious that one of Gwynedd's priorities was to address the concern. The reason behind the quality of the results was not evident, but it was suggested that the following matters had an impact:

- problems with recruiting mathematics teachers
- teaching styles of mathematics
- the subject is totally dependent upon examinations
- the preparation of pupils for the exam is crucial
- examination timetables, particularly in core subjects
- the amount of contact between pupils and teachers up to the day of the exam

If schools are underperforming, and are weak in certain subjects, there was confidence that GwE could identify the weaknesses, collaborate with the Department, and form partnerships with successful schools to drive them forward.

There was a tendency for the service's operational systems to focus on reviewing, concentrating on spreadsheets of 2013 results rather than placing the emphasis and priority on 2014 targets. Mr Evans was of the opinion that:

- focus should be placed on the future, rather than reviewing the past
- leadership was crucial, including the leadership of middle managers
- target-setting at the beginning of the cycle was essential (it was noted that the performance of secondary schools in Flintshire was 8% higher than Gwynedd on the basis of 2013 figures, and that this was due to the challenging targets which had been set)
- that joint support was important (e.g. partnerships between schools, mentoring)

From the perspective of the scrutiny role of Members, it was important to deal with the following issues:

- ask about the system of governance

- receive results data on a regional level
- monitor schools' attendance levels
- what works well in schools
- the role of the school in the community (a huge challenge for secondary schools - relationship with parents is important)

In conclusion, the Chair and Members thanked Mr Huw Foster Evans for his time and for his presentation, and wished him well in his post.

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For further background information, see the following websites:

My Local School: <http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/index.html?iaith=eng>

Robert Hill's Report: www.wales.gov.uk/consultations

The London Challenge: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/london-challenge>