
GWE JOINT COMMITTEE - 06/12/2023

Present:

Councillors: Julie Fallon (Chairperson) (Conwy County Borough Council); Beca Brown (Cyngor Gwynedd); Dafydd Roberts (Anglesey County Council); Gill German (Denbighshire County Council); Mared Eastwood (Flintshire County Council) and Phil Wynn (Wrexham County Borough Council).

Co-opted non-voting Members: Dylan Davies (Secondary Schools' Representative)

Non-voting Officers: Marc Berw Hughes (Anglesey County Council); Clare Scanlon (Conwy Borough County Council) and Debbie Anne Jones (Cyngor Gwynedd).

Officers present:

GwE - Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director); Alwyn Jones (Assistant Director); Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager) and Meleri H Roberts (Translator).

Cyngor Gwynedd (the Host Authority) - Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department); Siôn Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager); Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant) and Ffion Elain Evans (Democracy Services Officer).

Present for items 5 & 6: Yvonne Thomas (Audit Wales)

At the beginning of the meeting the Chairperson, on behalf of the Joint-Committee, expressed condolences to Clare Homard in her recent bereavement. It was also noted that Garem Jackson, the former Gwynedd Head of Education, has left. He was thanked for his support over the years and best wishes were conveyed for the future.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Dr Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire County Council) and Geraint Davies (Denbighshire County Council).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declaration of personal interest was made by any member present.

3. URGENT MATTERS

No urgent matters were raised.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

It was confirmed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 12 July 2023 are correct.

5. AUDIT WALES - GwE AUDIT PLAN 2023

The report was presented, noting that the Audit Plan and the accounts are not usually presented in the same meeting, but as the last Joint Committee meeting was postponed the Audit Plan is presented in this meeting. It was explained that the plan looks slightly different to those prepared by Audit Wales in the past, and that this is due to changes in international auditing standards. The Joint Committee was reminded that not one audit can provide absolute assurance that the statement of accounts is accurate and that auditors adopt a concept of materiality.

It was noted that due to the changes to international auditing standards auditors now have to do much more work on the risks, and attention was drawn to the risks discussed in the report. It was explained that the risk of management override is present in all entities and is therefore present in all audit plans in Wales, and that the auditors have no reason to believe that this is occurring in the GwE accounts. It was noted that the second risk is also general in nature and is therefore included in the majority of audit plans. In addition, it was explained that the third risk has been included due to amendments made to 22/23 accounts in the context of accounting treatment of grant funding.

Attention was drawn to the fee raised for the work undertaken, noting it is approximately 15% higher than last year's fee due to inflation and changes in audit arrangements.

One member asked about the pension fund and whether GwE is in a situation to withdraw money from the fund. In response, it was confirmed that the fund is a separate entity to any of the authorities and the Joint Committee, and that it is revalued every 3 years. It was explained that the most recent revaluation occurred in April 2023, and as the funding level of the Gwynedd Pension Fund is healthy the contributions of employees were reduced overall. It was confirmed that withdrawal of funds is not part of Gwynedd Pension Fund policy and that contributions are reduced instead.

DECISION

To accept and approve the 2023 Audit Plan

6. JOINT COMMITTEE FINAL ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2023 AND RELEVANT AUDIT

The report was presented, noting that Audit Wales intends to issue an unqualified audit opinion on the accounts this year. Following this, GwE is required to prepare a letter of representation on what is noted in the report. The Chair of the Joint Committee and the Finance Officer are required to sign the letter of representation and present it to the auditors.

One correction noted in the auditors' report was highlighted. It was explained that an unusual and unprecedented situation had arisen when the draft accounts were presented back in July. It was noted that it was a technical and unprecedented situation and that there was no clear guidance on how to deal with such a situation. As a result, the finance officers contacted Audit Wales for guidance, but it took some time for the auditors to decide on the right course of action. It was therefore explained that the amendment arises from different advice received at a later date on how to deal with the matter, and that it has now been resolved.

Reference was made to paragraph six in the report, which notes that work has not been completed. It was confirmed that the work has now been completed and that there are no other matters arising. The fact that there were no other matters arising is a very good reflection of the arrangements in place to prepare the accounts, it was explained.

The teams in both Audit Wales and Cyngor Gwynedd Finance Department were thanked for their hard work and co-operation. The accounts are a source of pride it was added, and they provide assurance to members that priorities are in the right place and that money is used appropriately.

DECISION

To accept and note the report on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales, approve the 2022/23 accounts and authorise the Chair to sign the letter of representation on behalf of the Joint Committee.

7. GwE BUDGET 2023/2024 - REVIEW UP TO THE END OF SEPTEMBER 2023

The report was presented, explaining that it is a forecast for the current financial year and that a net overspend of £36,614 is foreseen by the end of the 2023/24 financial year. It was noted that 'employees' is the main overspend headline, and that the current staffing structure of the service is currently under review. There are currently posts which have not yet been filled in the service and this will go some of the way to reduce the expenditure, but it is likely that the savings will have to come from the staffing structure.

Attention was drawn to the underspend against the travel budget, and it was noted that this is the first complete financial year where staff travel is more on a par with that before the pandemic. It was noted it would be beneficial to consider whether the new way of working is leading to a reduction in travel costs in the long term and that it would be a matter to review in the future.

It was explained that GwE has an underspend fund as a result of underspend in previous years, and the recommendation would be to use this fund to finance the overspend at the end of the financial year.

During the subsequent discussion, the GwE Managing Director proposed that a Task and Finish Group be formed to consider the various options for the next financial year. He suggested that the group could report back on the various options to the Joint Committee, giving the Joint Committee an opportunity to discuss which option would be best in moving forward.

DECISION

- a) To accept and approve the report.**
- b) To form a Task and Finish group to look at the financial options for the 2024/25 financial year.**

8. GwE BUSINESS PLAN 2023/2024 - QUARTER 1 & 2 MONITORING REPORT

The GwE Managing Director presented the report, noting it is appropriate that the business plan follows the budget reports as the careful planning that takes place when producing the business plan is integrated into the budgetary requirements. The focus in this meeting was on 'Objective 1 - School Improvement', and it was explained there has been a culture change in GwE over the last 5/6 years. He noted this is now coming to fruition, and that the service has a close relationship with school staff in order to be able to identify priorities.

He went on to explain that the inspection cycle for the six authorities has come to an end, and that the school improvement aspect has come out strong. It was explained there are no recommendations on how the school improvement service may be improved. As a result, this positive nature needs to continue it was noted, and that information arising from the findings of the Task and Finish Group needs to inform the next step.

Recognition was given to the fact there has been pressure in recent times on regulatory duties but that reports are consistently positive. This means there is external assurance that GwE is proceeding in the right direction and that the collaboration is unhindered. This is key to the success of the service it was emphasised.

During the subsequent discussion, members made the following comments:

- Thanks were given for the report and there was praise for the support and all the work undertaken by the service.
- There was a request for all the feedback received across the region to be shared with the Joint Committee, as it is important to see how schools are feeling across the region in order to be able to compare with schools within individual authorities.
- There was concern about the review of salary grades, even though there was no reference to this in neither the report nor the Business Plan. In response, it was explained that GwE as a service is looking for consistency and fairness and that it is likely there must be a restructure in order to ensure there is an appropriate structure in place in moving forward. It was noted that this is a discussion to be raised with the Task and Finish Group, which would be looking at the financial situation in its entirety.

DECISION

To accept and approve the report.

9. REVIEW OF RISK REGISTER

The risk register was presented, explaining it is a live document that is reviewed on a regular basis and presented to the Joint Committee annually, and when new risks are identified and there is a need for the Joint Committee to be aware of them. It was explained that the risk level has been maximised with some risks. It was noted that one risk for individual members and the Joint Committee is how to ensure the appropriate school level support with a shrinking budget and fewer people to undertake that work. The need to consider how to get the model right was noted and to ensure balance in terms of what the budget can do. It was added that individual risks can lead to a compound risk to the good reputation of individual councils, the Joint Committee and schools.

Wednesday, 6th December, 2023

This document is a live document and it would need to be revisited, especially in the context of the Task and Finish Group as the impact of any decisions must be considered.

During the subsequent discussion, members made the following comments:

- It was noted there will be an increase in the number of Estyn inspections next year, and concern was expressed about all the time used to inform different inspectors. There is a need for a more balanced inspection calendar it was said, so as to avoid duplication, and a focus on improving services rather than informing inspectors.
- The Joint Committee Chair explained that she has asked the Minister for Education to hold a meeting with all local authority Education Cabinet members to discuss the budget. She suggested that members could ask about the increase in Estyn inspections in the meeting.
- Attention was drawn to the fact that there is a page missing in the English version of the report and a request was made for said page.

DECISION

To accept the latest amendments to the Risk Register.

10. GWE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SUPPORT

The report was presented, noting that the Professional Learning Offer is provided on three tiers:

1. The generic offer of professional learning programmes or the training that is available to everyone across the region.
2. The professional learning support that promotes collaboration in primary clusters and the secondary alliances, as well as the professional learning networks supporting secondary, primary and special schools.
3. The specific professional learning offer that is available to all schools individually in their support plan.

It was highlighted that professional learning support is different and separate to school improvement work. It was explained that the generic professional learning offer is broad and comprehensive and that it arises from the most common priorities in regional schools. It was suggested that it could be argued that the offer is too broad, but the service serves approximately 12,000 teaching staff and an effort is made to ensure there is something to suit everyone.

The need to ensure that messages regarding training are clear was noted, and the need for collaboration and support for teachers and practitioners. It was explained that, in turn, teachers need to commit to implementing what they learn and that training sessions are a good opportunity for teachers to work together and share good practice.

During the subsequent discussion, members made the following comments:

- Members noted they are comfortable and satisfied with the provision overall.
- There was concern that it is noted in the report there are no financial implications arising from the offer, as it is impossible to produce something commercial without investing money and human resources.
- In relation to this, the importance of looking beyond schools was noted, in the context of generating an income as schools are already under immense financial pressure.

DECISION

To accept and approve the content of the report and the plans to develop and evolve the Professional Learning Offer in the future.

11. ESTYN CONSULTATION ON FUTURE INSPECTION ARRANGEMENTS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT EDUCATION SERVICES AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SERVICES

The report was presented, explaining that Estyn is introducing new inspection arrangements for education providers in Wales from September 2024 onwards. It was noted that Estyn has undertaken a consultation to gather the views of individuals and organisations on how best to develop guidance and inspection approaches from 2024 onwards. It was explained that a response was formulated on behalf of the Joint Committee on 27 November, and that it is presented today so that the content may be formally noted.

DECISION

To formally note the response of the Joint Committee to the Estyn consultation.

The meeting started at 10.30am and concluded at 11.35am.