



## **REPORT TO LOCAL AUTHORITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEES Autumn 2020**

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**Report by:** GwE Core Leads

**Subject:** GwE work programme and support to schools during the COVID Pandemic

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### **Purpose of the report**

To present a report to Local Authority scrutiny committees on how the regional consortium, in partnership with the Local Authorities, has evolved and adapted to support schools during the COVID pandemic.

### **Background, context and outline**

Staff in the Local Authorities and GwE have adapted their work in order to continue to provide effective services and support for all their school communities during the COVID pandemic. During this very difficult period, GwE have kept true to their vision and values as an organisation that is continually learning. The OECD's transversal themes of Trust, Thinking together, Time and Technology have remained at the heart of the work with schools and partners.

The service in its entirety has re focused several times during this period to meet the needs of the range of stakeholders. The ability to be flexible and agile and to work effectively together in different teams, often cross sector, has had significant impact on organisational behaviour and external perception. At the heart of the refocusing has been the need to ensure that the well-being of school leaders, their staff and learners is paramount to the decision-making and ensuring that the right level of support, operational or professional, can be directed accurately by the service. Regular contact with school leaders has been well received and has contributed to Head teachers feeling that they could turn to a professional colleague to share challenging issues and to find solutions to address day-to-day issues. These included operational discussions on opening school safely as well as professional discussions regarding distance and blended learning.

Weekly staff meetings have contributed to a consistency of approach in ensuring common messages to school teachers and leaders. There has been a strong emphasis on modelling appropriate and supportive behaviour throughout the period. This has included very regular contact with headteachers to ensure that they get the appropriate support to operate effectively and also as a sounding board to support their own well-being. Further support for senior leaders well-being has been provided through a series of workshops and webinars which will support their resilience during

this difficult period. GwE staff are also conducting face to face pastoral visits to schools during the autumn term on behalf of the Local Authorities.

GwE sees itself as a partnership organisation, especially with the Local Authorities and even more so during the lockdown period and in moving forward. GwE have worked effectively with Welsh Government on policy and continuity of learning. It has also worked consistently with the other regions and with Estyn in preparing guidance and resources for distance and blended learning and to provide advice on formative and continuous assessment. It has also strengthened the working relationship between those parties with positive professional exchanges, ensuring that the stakeholders are getting quality advice and resources.

One of the main strengths of work across North Wales has been the consistent messaging from the six local authorities through their political education portfolio holders and directors working with GwE to have one common message for the schools in North Wales. This consistency of messaging has been not only welcomed by schools but also by teacher unions and non-teaching unions who welcomed the clarity of messaging and support for their staff. One such example is the operational group of local authority and regional staff working on and developing risk assessments policy, advice and guidelines, and creating a regional dashboard which is a strong foundation for all schools to be able to reopen with risks being identified and locally managed and supported.

The six local authorities and GwE have taken a collegiate and collective regional approach to supporting schools throughout the COVID pandemic. This was clearly demonstrated in the consistent regional approach in developing a supportive framework to ensure that all regional schools had the right policies in place together with a comprehensive risk assessment in order to create a safe environment to welcome the children back into schools.

The framework included resources to support planning for:

- 1) Health and safety requirements
- 2) Site and facilities arrangements
- 3) Transport
- 4) Staffing arrangements
- 5) Blended teaching and learning
- 6) Inclusion and pupil support
- 7) Key management tasks.

Teamwork, joint working and collaboration has also been at the heart of the work with schools. All schools in the region are part of a cluster or a forum where they can come together to discuss operational issues as well as sharing best practice regarding distance and blended learning. This joint work facilitated by GwE staff has been very successful and sets a very strong infrastructure in place for future work and working relationship across the region.

One noteworthy aspect of the work has also been the bespoke nature of support for teachers and schools. GwE have worked on the strengths of individuals within the team and redeployed them where they have provided the maximum impact in their roles in supporting individual local authorities, schools, clusters, subject and phase networks. This bespoke provision of support based on strong principles of collaboration, exchanging and sharing and developing the best practice is a key learning principle that we will continue to develop in the next stages of evolving the service.

Schools who were causing concern prior to lockdown have had access to clear and targeted support to help them through this difficult period. This has been at several levels including network support, support to senior leadership and middle management in those schools and support with provision of

distance and blended learning. Schools that have found the lockdown and post lockdown period difficult due to staff having to self-isolate have been supported in various ways. This has included modelling of exemplar materials, webinars, shared materials and resources. Also, GwE staff directly leading, directly teaching in schools or providing distance learning to learners.

A lot of time and energy have been put in place to contact international experts and to research international practice to learn and establish the principles of effective distance and blended learning. Discussions with international colleagues including the OECD have also deepened thinking within the organisation. GwE have provided practical support for leaders to enable them to consider their whole school strategic planning of provision for distance and blended learning, refine and evaluate their evolving provision and consider planning for various scenarios where pupils may be in school and / or at home over the coming academic year. This has supported schools to have a better strategic overview of their provision.

GwE is also supporting schools in evaluating the quality of their blended learning and distance learning provision, sharing local examples and case studies of effective provision to reduce variation where it exists. Live streaming is developing well and enhancing the blended learning experience. Schools now realise that COVID will be with them for an extended period and are planning more strategically and effectively.

Self-evaluation and improvement processes have become an intrinsic part of the work of schools. As schools and settings are becoming more confident with the delivery of learning at a distance, so they will be better able to adapt their self-evaluation processes and tools to monitor, evaluate, review and revise if appropriate, the provision.

School leaders acknowledge that one of the greatest challenges to the delivery of blended and distance learning has been and continues to be ensuring that staff and pupils have the necessary skills' set and resources available to them. There has been a rapid pace of upskilling for some staff to move to digital platforms. Schools have undertaken a range of planned professional learning offered by regional consortia around the use of digital technology to support learning. This has also proved to be an opportunity as a greater number of practitioners are now able to confidently use an increasing range of technology to support learning.

Many schools acknowledge that parental engagement has been a key factor in securing effective distance/blended learning. GwE and the Local Authorities have provided a range of guidance to support school in improving parental engagement, including the sharing of good practice.

Many schools also acknowledge that there are ongoing operational challenges that change on a day-to-day basis, where a range of scenarios have to be planned for including cohorts of learners self-isolating or individual / small groups of learners and staff self-isolating. There are many examples of how schools are managing these complex situations well, having clear whole school strategies. GwE and the Local Authorities continue to support schools, using clusters and networks of schools to support each other and share resources and strategies.

GwE have also adopted a regional approach to accelerating learning, working on a tri-level approach which includes universal support led by the consortium, targeted support jointly led by the consortia and the local authority, with the acute being the responsibility of the local authority. This work has been developed on an evidence base approach working closely with Bangor University and regional staff to ensure a range of high-quality resources to support physical and emotional wellbeing, literacy and numeracy, these being made available to all learners across, all age range in all schools. The impact of this work will be captured through a regional dashboard which will include all grants made available to schools by Welsh Government during this financial year.

During the autumn term, GwE have provided opportunities for schools to form alliances or to work within developed clusters to address gaps in provision and alternative ways of delivery to meet any future lockdown scenarios. This work will:

- Identify, develop and share blended learning resources within the cluster/alliance and with other regional clusters/alliances;
- Ensure all identified and developed resources are submitted through their Supporting Improvement Adviser to be included on the GwE Support Centre;
- Support schools within the cluster with their provision to meet any future 'lockdown scenarios';
- Prioritise additional support for the secondary sector in preparation for the awarding of examination grades in 2021.

Schools in the GwE region will have a significant collection of resources for each age group.

The GwE Professional Offer for this academic year has been rationalised and concentrates on 5 main areas: Wellbeing, The Reform Journey, Developing the Workforce, Accelerating the Learning and Digital Learning. In addition, GwE will continue to facilitate cluster working to support the development of Curriculum for Wales, ALN Transformation and the Welsh Language.

During the COVID period GwE has continually reflected on the effectiveness of the work. Both internal and external resources have been used to ensure that we have a balanced perspective on the quality of the work. This has included working with the Education Development Trust and Steve Munby to develop the organisation and plan our future infrastructure.

### **Main outcomes and impact of the work**

- Effective collegiate and collective regional approach between the six local authorities and GwE.
- Joint working has ensured strong governance and regional consistency in support, messaging and guidance given to schools.
- Strengthened collaboration between peers at a cluster/forum level has ensured effective co-constructed strategic thinking and direction.
- Clear regional and local approach in place for effective repurposing of both the service and its schools.
- Schools are well informed and confident that effective support is available should any needs arise.
- School leaders' wellbeing supported through regular and clear communication.
- Clear guidance given on how to prioritise and structure both Distance and Blended Learning.
- Schools provided with coherent guidance and resources to effectively support vulnerable learners with their wellbeing, engagement and learning.
- Best practice being shared across schools and clusters, i.e. engaging with reluctant learners and families, digital platforms and communication systems, blended learning models, etc.

## Other outcomes and impact

- Effective communication provided via single point of contact (SIA) for school leaders and ease of access to support.
- Schools have been able to remain open to key workers in the event of staff shortages.
- Schools are well informed and confident that support is available should any needs arise. School leaders' wellbeing is supported through regular communication.
- Shared understanding of the importance of the welfare of pupils, parents and staff
- Clear guidance given on how to prioritise and structure both Distance and Blended Learning.
- Schools having access to a wealth of quality resources for reference as they plan for and deliver distance and blended learning.
- Comprehensive distance and blended learning models available for schools to adopt, adapt or refer to. This has in turn ensured strengthened leadership and improved balance of work that can be completed at home.
- Co-ordinated approach to supporting schools which has led to greater consistency and quality of distance and blended learning across the region.
- Best practice being shared across schools i.e. engaging with reluctant learners and families, digital platforms and communication systems etc.
- Strengthened use of ICT to enable effective communication between schools, within schools and with school stakeholders.
- School staff being upskilled through the use of a digital platform for professional development.
- Information shared with the LA is up to date and timely support is given to any School.
- In conjunction with the LA, ensured that the process of appointing school leadership candidates is appropriate and fair.
- Consistent messages disseminated to schools by GwE / LA officers.
- Strengthened collaboration between peers at a cluster level through digital means ensuring co-constructed strategic thinking.
- Strengthened collaboration between local authority officers and GwE.
- Clear regional and local approach in place for adapting schools for different purposes.
- Effective cascading of key messages to school staff to ensure consistency and clarity.
- Increased collaboration between regions and other stakeholders.
- Increased understanding of key messages and work streams.
- Stronger awareness amongst school leaders of effective strategies to ensure continuation of school business.
- Quality Professional Learning developed in readiness for future needs.
- Newly Qualified Teachers having clarity regarding completing their induction year.
- Strong partnership work with Bangor University to ensure initial teacher training students have clarity on the appointment system for next year.
- Strong partnership working with Caban to ensure increased research opportunities and recognition of excellence by School staff.

## Next Steps

1. Support schools to implement the recommendations of the Design and Delivery Board for the awarding of qualifications in summer 2021.
2. Continue to work closely in partnership with Local Authorities to support the wellbeing of Head teachers and school staff.
3. Deliver an effective professional learning offer to support schools to address immediate needs and to implement the Welsh Government reform journey

4. Continue to support clusters/alliances to plan for the continuity of learning so that they can effectively meet any future lockdown scenarios.
5. Strengthen the culture, behaviour, systems and processes so that leaders and teachers are incentivised to adopt a collegiate approach to school improvement.
6. Develop a regional qualitative framework for holistically capturing and evaluating progress in a school.

### **Supporting Documents**

- Appendix 1 – Summary of work undertaken
- Appendix 2 – Professional Learning Report
- Appendix 3 – Risk Assessment Dashboard
- Appendix 4 - Accelerating Learning Programme (ALP) Resources
- Appendix 5 - GwE Professional Offer 2020-21