
GwE JOINT COMMITTEE - 10 November 2021

Present:

Councillors: Phil Wynn (Chair - Wrexham County Borough Council), Julie Fallon (Conwy County Borough Council), Ian Roberts (Flintshire County Council), Meirion Jones (Anglesey County Council), Huw Hilditch-Roberts (Denbighshire County Council), Cemlyn Williams (Gwynedd Council).

Co-opted non-voting Members: Jonathan Morgan (Special Schools' Representative), Claire Armitstead (Secondary Schools' Representative)

Officers present: Annwen Morgan (Chief Executive, Anglesey County Council), Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority), Sion Huws (Senior Lawyer - Corporate, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority), Rhys Howard Hughes (Anglesey County Council), Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire County Council), Garem Jackson (Gwynedd Council), Arwyn Thomas (GwE Managing Director), Alwyn Jones (GwE Assistant Director), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant, Gwynedd Council - Host Authority), Yvonne Thomas (Audit Wales), Sioned Owen (Audit Wales), Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager, GwE), and Natalie Lloyd Jones (Democracy Services Officers, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority).

Others invited: Gareth Williams (Chair of GwE Advisory Board)

1. ELECTING A CHAIRPERSON

Councillor Phil Wynn, Wrexham County Borough Council, was elected as Chair for this meeting of the Joint Committee.

2. ELECTING A VICE-CHAIRPERSON

Councillor Meirion Jones, Isle of Anglesey County Council was elected as Vice-chair for this Committee.

3. APOLOGIES

Apologies received from the following: Karen Evans (Wrexham County Borough Council)

4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

5. URGENT MATTERS

Best wishes were given to Annwen Morgan on her retirement and she was thanked for all her diligence as a member of the Joint Committee.

Best wishes were also given to Dafydd Edwards on his retirement and he was thanked for his invaluable work over the years in relation to GwE's finances.

GwE's Managing Director added that these two very important members in GwE's history would be very much missed.

He noted that Annwen Morgan, as head of education and chief executive, had represented heads and had provided GwE with constant guidance and wisdom.

He thanked Dafydd Edwards for his clear and sound advice and for being a good friend to GwE on issues extending beyond the expertise of officers. He added that Dafydd's wisdom in regard to financial arrangement as well as his foresights had been exceptional.

Examination Series 2022

It was noted that Year 12 had not experienced external examinations, and with Covid levels still high, it was suggested that a letter should be sent to the Minister for Education, on behalf of the Joint Committee, pressing for clarity regarding the 2022 examination series, and that this decision be reported to schools and pupils prior to Christmas.

Other members supported these comments. It was noted:

- That it is important to obtain a firm and timely decision on the matter.
- If external examinations did not go ahead in 2022, that clarity would be needed regarding the requirements, so that schools and young people could prepare accordingly.
- That the issue should be raised with Qualifications Wales and WJEC.

It was agreed that a letter be sent to the Minister along these lines, also sharing the Joint Committee's concern amongst members and directors.

6. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

It was confirmed that the record presented appropriately reflected the meeting held on 22 September, 2021.

7. FINAL ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2021 AND RELEVANT AUDIT

DECISION

To accept and note the report on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales, approve the 2020/21 accounts and authorise the Chair to sign the Accounts and the Representation Letter on behalf of the Joint Committee.

DISCUSSION:

The report was presented by GwE's statutory Finance Officer noting that it encompasses pre-audit accounts as presented to the Joint Committee in May, 2021. Staff from Gwynedd Council were thanked, as were Audit Wales for auditing GwE for the first time. The reported was noted as being clean and a welcome one. It was noted that the accounts had remained relatively unchanged since that meeting and that corrections had been confined to the notes. It was noted that the minor amendments did not change the main statements.

Sioned Owen (Audit Wales) outlined the main points regarding the accounts and highlighted the intention to publish an unconditional audit report. The finance team were thanked for their support in a first-time audit under challenging circumstances.

The Committee was asked to allow the Chair together with Gwynedd Council Head of Finance (as GwE's Statutory Finance Officer), to electronically sign the Accounts and Representation Letter (Appendix 1 to the Auditor General for Wales report).

Comments arising from the discussion:

- Audit Wales were welcomed to their first meeting of the Joint Committee. The finance team were also thanked.
- Dafydd and the team were thanked for their work noting that their work had been a strength.

8. GWE BUDGET 2021-2022 - QUARTER 2 REVIEW

DECISION

To accept the report.

DISCUSSION:

Joint Committee members were updated on the latest financial review of GwE's budget for the 2021/22 financial year. It was noted that GwE's 2021/22 budget is under control, despite the continuous impact of Covid-19.

An underspend of approximately £80,000 was noted. He explained that the impact of Covid-19 was still real in terms of school visits, adding that these had recommenced albeit not to the same extent.

GwE Managing Director explained that the underspend fund stood at approximately £643,000. He noted that a vast proportion of this would go to schools to create capacity to face the challenges of the transformation agenda. The content of the expenditure would be shared with the Management Board in order to ensure that the Directors are comfortable with the direction of expenditure.

9. **PUPIL DEVELOPMENT GRANT 2021-22**

DECISION

To accept and approve the content of the report.

DISCUSSION:

GwE's Managing Director presented the report for information purposes. He explained that this had not been discussed earlier in the year due to the May elections.

Reference was made to the detail of the plans that are a continuation of the plans put in place over the last academic year. He explained that the service was working in close partnership with the Local Authorities to identify priorities.

He noted that questions often arose regarding the allocation and this was explained to the Joint Committee. The Joint Committee heard how the money is being used at a cluster level and to fund regional projects.

He referred to the dashboard set for the grants to help schools to plan and report on progress.

He explained that schools were encouraged to complete the work in order to obtain an overview of expenditure and to help with reporting back on expenditure to Welsh Government.

In conclusion, he noted that discussions were ongoing to consider whether this is the most appropriate funding model for FSM.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- It was noted that the number of e-FSM pupils had risen over the last 18 months, therefore a request to see more recent data was made.
- It was noted that the allocation needs to be increased to cope with increasing numbers.
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In response, GwE's Managing Director noted:

- That this was a complex agenda and in terms of education that schools depend on the funding to ensure provision e.g. to employ support staff. He added that any change would impact on the running of schools.
- It was recommended that Professor David Egan should be invited to the Joint Committee so as to allow opportunity to influence the work.

10. **GWE REGIONAL BUSINESS PLAN 2021-2022 - QUARTER 2 MONITORING REPORT**

DECISION

To approve and accept the monitoring report for quarter 2.

DISCUSSION:

GwE's Assistant Director presented the report and thanked the Performance Management Manager for pulling the report together.

The Joint Committee were reminded of the 6 objectives of the Business Plan and reference was made to the appendices that include a narrative on progress against objectives and appendix that includes regional data on school and staff engagement.

He added that a local record of the regional data was being prepared for individual authorities which will be shared via the county quality boards.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- The report was appreciated and confidence was expressed in the content presented to the Joint Committee.

11. SUPPORT ALL SCHOOLS WITH THE CURRICULUM FOR WALES: DEVELOP LOCAL AND REGIONAL CURRICULUM FOR WALES NETWORKS

DECISION

To accept and approve the report.

DISCUSSION

GwE's Managing Director presented the report and referred to the document published by the Government at the beginning of term which very clearly set out the choice for secondary pupils.

He added that they were consulting on GwE's strategy and that one of the main strands of the strategy is curriculum support. He noted that Professor Graham Donaldson was involved in the regional groups advising on the direction of the consultation.

He explained that schools varied in terms of how they have engaged with the curriculum changes and that the current situation has allowed a focus on pedagogy and digital skills. He added that there is evidence of excellent collaboration across North Wales and explained that schools across the region were openly invited to identify lead members in alliances to become involved in networks. He added that these were for the areas of learning and experience, another network for curriculum design and another for assessment.

Elaborating on this point, he noted that approx. 600 practitioners were involved in the networks and that numbers are expected to increase after the first meeting. He explained that this would require funding and suggested that this should be the main use of the reserves.

In relation to assessment, he noted that they were awaiting further guidance from the Government.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- The Committee were thankful for the report and glad to see that Professor Graham Donaldson was involved in the work.
- It was added that the report showed clarity on what pupils need.
- It was asked whether the enthusiasm is still alive within the networks, amongst practitioners.
- Concern was noted about the expectation upon schools to release staff to attend sessions as part of the networks if staff numbers are low due to Covid-19.
- Clarity was sought on assessments in order to establish whether secondary schools need more time to decide when to start on the new curriculum.
- A member added that Denbighshire schools intend to start in 2022.

In response, GwE Managing Director noted the following points:

- Schools are generally eager to be involved in the agenda and move forwards.
- He noted that involvement in the networks would pose difficulties due to circumstances relating to the pandemic in schools, particularly small schools. However, he emphasised the importance for the discussion to take place at a cluster level so that a member in attendance could report back to those not present.
- In the same vein, he added that more are expected to attend once they see the practicality of the agenda.
- In terms of planning when to start, he noted that this could be done in either 2022 or 2023. He added that there is a need to work with schools on a phased approach to the new system.
- He agreed with the member and noted that many secondary schools had noted their desire to embark on the curriculum in 2022, whilst others are subject to circumstance and readiness.

The meeting commenced at 13:30 and concluded at 14:40.

CHAIR