
GWE JOINT COMMITTEE - 16/02/22

Present:

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

Non-voting Officers: Dr Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire Council), Garem Jackson (Gwynedd Council) and Karen Evans (Wrexham County Borough Council).

Officers present:

GwE - Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director), Alwyn Jones (Assistant Director), Marc Berw Hughes (Senior Lead - Primary) and Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager).

Gwynedd Council, the Host Authority - Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance), Sion Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager), Hywyn Jones (Group Accountant), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Managing Director Announcements

- Dafydd Edwards' successor, Dewi Morgan, was welcomed to the meeting as the 151 Officer, and he was congratulated on his appointment to the role.
- Best wishes were given to Annwen Morgan, Lead Chief Executive, on her retirement and she was thanked for her service over the years.
- Reference was made to the recent death of Aled Roberts, the Language Commissioner, who was also a member of the GwE Advisory Board, and condolences extended to his family in their bereavement.
- It was noted this is the last meeting of the current Joint Committee period, and members were thanked for their work over the last 5 years. It was also noted that GwE staff wish to thank all Joint Committee members for the guidance and support given over the period. It was explained that Councillors Meirion Jones and Cemlyn Williams will not stand again in the May election. Both were thanked for their support and guidance during this period, and best wishes extended on their retirement from politics.

The Chair thanked everyone for their commitment and collaboration during the last 5 years, especially the Managing Director and the team. His best wishes were given to the two members who would be retiring in May, and also to everyone else who would be standing again in the election.

1. APOLOGIES

Claire Armitstead (Secondary Schools Representative), Richard Collet (Primary Schools Representative), Rhys Howard Hughes (Anglesey County Council), Geraint Davies (Denbighshire County Council) and Gareth Williams (Chair of GwE Advisory Board).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

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

3. URGENT MATTERS

There were no urgent matters.

4. MINUTES

It was confirmed that the record presented appropriately reflected the meeting held on 10 November, 2021.

5. GWE BUDGET 2021-22 - QUARTER 3 REVIEW

DECISION

To accept the report.

Discussion

Presented - report by Managing Director and Head of Finance, updating members on the latest financial review of GwE's budget for the 2021/22 financial year. The report also focused on the significant financial variances, with Appendix 1 containing full financial information.

In response to a request for more information regarding the intention to use an additional £100,000 against the general school improvement grant heading, the Managing Director explained: -

- The underspend in the last 2 years during the pandemic is a little over £250,000 and, ideally, we would wish to return to that situation as the money needs to be in schools.
- Schools are facing significant transformation challenges at present with the advent of the new curriculum, the ambitious target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050, the ALN Transformation Programme and the significant work to be undertaken with assessment, along with well-being and leadership considerations.
- One of the challenges facing schools at present is a shortage of supply teachers. However, this would mean investment in the longer term, so that schools have the financial resource to plan these main priorities within their school development plans. Therefore, as the pandemic subsides, more supply will become available so that schools can build more capacity into their planning structures to realise these changes.

6. BASELINE BUDGET 2022-23

DECISION

To adopt the baseline budget for 2022/23 as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.

Discussion

Presented - report by the Head of Finance, outlining the GwE 2022/23 baseline budget (Appendix 1) and financial contributions of authorities (Appendix 2). The Joint Committee was invited to adopt the baseline budget.

It was suggested the sum of the balances, close to £600,000, seems high, and it was asked whether officers are comfortable with this. In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- The figure was a little less than £300,000 two years ago, approximately half the current sum. Personally, he would like to bring the figure back down to that level,

which would be relatively easy to do through allocating money to support priorities, to give capacity to schools.

- It would then need to be ensured the infrastructure and structures behind this are in place, in order to ensure value for this additional money on a school level, authority level and then regional level.
- Due to the current increase in inflation, there is a need to consider what is a prudent sum to keep in reserve, also keeping in mind that early indications show the budget for 2023/24 to be potentially more challenging. In addition, even though the Welsh Government grants budget has not been received as yet, the initial narrative mentions a considerable cut to the grants pool, but without seeing the details, the impact of this is not yet clear.
- Should the grants budget be fairly consistent with the situation this year, and with advice on what is prudent in terms of inflation, the difference would bring us back to approximately 2-3%, or to the situation of 2 years ago. This is the aim, if not by the end of this financial year then certainly during the next financial year.

The Chair noted the uncertainty around inflation related to school teachers' pay in September is also an unknown cost to be addressed from balances, rather than cutting services, and it is therefore always wise to have some reserves.

7. GWE REGIONAL BUSINESS PLAN 2021-2022 - QUARTER 3 MONITORING REPORT

DECISION

To approve and accept the monitoring report for quarter 3.

Discussion

Presented - GwE Managing Director's report asking the Joint Committee to accept and approve the quarter 3 monitoring report - GwE Regional Business Plan 2021-22.

Concern was expressed regarding capacity in light of the increasing number of Estyn visits, and the need to have a clear understanding of how the new system will work and the impact of Covid on this, given that pupils directly impacted by the pandemic are now of examination age. It was asked when will we know how much learners have fallen behind, and how much consideration will be given to this by Estyn.

In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- The last 2 years, with no formal inspections, has provided an opportunity for the system to breathe, grow and collaborate on improving different aspects, especially in the transformation context of main policy matters.
- In terms of how the new system will work, what form the inspections will take is not the main consideration but rather the culture, and how to manage this in a fair and just manner across the system, as different individuals go from school to school.
- It is expected there will be considerable pressure on the system in moving forward, and the first inspections in September are key in terms of seeing whether Estyn intends to look at the context or not.
- With schools having only 10 days' notice of an inspection, the situation would be very different to that of the last 2 years, and this is where collaboration is important. There are procedures in place between GwE and the local authorities, but with twice as many inspections there would also be a cost in terms of human resources.

It was noted a lot of work has been done to develop the next generation of school headteachers, and to encourage deputy headteachers and so forth to apply for headship, but it was asked whether applicants from across the border would need to be considered for posts, and if so, what initial support would be available to ensure they are totally aware of the immense changes currently under way in education in Wales.

In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- He was not overly concerned about numbers, but rather the lack of opportunity to put succession planning in action over the last 2 years, as the focus has had to be on maintaining rather than developing education.
- Supporting aspiring headteachers and new headteachers would be one of the main priorities in moving forward.

8. PROGRESS REPORT ON REFORM JOURNEY AUTUMN TERM 2021

DECISION

To accept and approve the content of the report along with the high-level priorities noted.

Discussion

Presented - Assistant Director's report presenting information to Joint Committee members as regards the current position of schools and PRUs in terms of addressing the renew and reform agenda, based on the evidence gathered by GwE School Improvement Advisers as part of their work in supporting schools during the autumn term 2021. The Joint Committee was asked to accept and approve the content of the report along with the high-level priorities noted.

The Chair of the Management Board confirmed she and chief officers fully support the reform journey, and that they appreciate the comprehensive overview from the Managing Director and his team, and also input from other officers in Management Board meetings regarding opportunities to support curriculum delivery.

It was noted a number of challenging elements are currently under way. It was asked is there anything the Joint Committee should be especially mindful of at this point. In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- The need for everyone to be aware of the significant shift from a national curriculum, whereby everyone is relatively uniform in its delivery, to a local curriculum that is purpose led, and the importance of governors and leadership in schools leading this offer in their communities and for their pupils, and that they communicate this clearly.
- School leadership is so important in defining the provision for pupils to ensure they succeed in their local community and this has not, potentially, been fully realised.
- Another challenge for politicians and officers is that provision will be different in schools, and that comparison of schools will also be slightly different.
- Even though leadership needs to be clear about the rationale for its local offer, communities are completely different in terms of language and culture etc. There will be some core common elements, but other elements would make the offer in different areas unique, specific and personal to those pupils and their journey to the world of work, education or training.

- We have the task of educating ourselves, and officers in their scrutiny reports will need to explain and give a context to the change in culture and the difference between school offers.

Concern was expressed as regards the capacity of the infrastructure to cope with all the pressure in moving forward e.g. the curriculum and the ALN Transformation Programme, and it was asked whether we should push back a little, and state it is not 'business as usual' in education. In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- There are priorities agreed on a national level and which must be adopted on a local level. It is agreed there is tension, and the role of GwE is to assist schools to improve and put things in place, so that adopting the transformation does not take place between 31 August and 1 September, but rather over a period of 2-3-4 years.
- The shift in the ALN Transformation Programme is considerable and places the burden on a school level, and in bringing everything together it is key that support services are at the forefront in terms of schools' needs, and are preparing for the next steps.
- As the pandemic has had more of an impact on some schools than others, it is important to break these elements down into smaller parts, to enable schools in different situations to cope.
- Estyn's decision to double the number of inspections and reduce the notice period to 10 days presents a higher level of concern in the system.
- GwE is discussing the definition of 'readiness' with Welsh Government. We were ready to commit for September in the secondary sector, but the quality of the offer needs to be built into this, in order to be able to offer something better than what is happening at present.
- Taking everything into account, leadership, well-being and taking care of middle and senior managers in schools as well as colleagues in local authorities, people are under considerable strain. The agenda would have been challenging without the pandemic, but with the pandemic is it extremely challenging, and this is why the support element is so important.
- The important question to ask is this: how does the narrative actually look when the regulator asks schools to prove what they have done, and how empathic will this be, given the context of the last 2 years?

Even though there is value in a local curriculum that reflects the needs of the local community, it was noted the key element in all this is the blended leadership between leaders and school governors, in order to ensure consistency as learners transfer from the primary sector to the secondary sector. Otherwise, considerable problems could arise as pupils from a number of different primary schools start in Year 7 without having had the same experiences and opportunities to develop the same set of skills.

It was noted chief officers are doing their utmost to assist headteachers to be as ready as possible for 1 September, and are constantly conveying the message to Welsh Government and Estyn that it is not 'business as usual' in education. It was explained headteachers have been given opportunities to engage at a convenient time and pace within the schedule set for the beginning of September. It was added headteachers feel frustrated as they are constantly being pulled back to deal with day to day operational matters due to the pandemic despite the considerable issues on the horizon, especially challenges in managing pupil behaviour as a result of the trauma caused by the pandemic.

It was noted GwE is doing exceptional work in continuing to support the development of the new curriculum.

It was noted the readiness of the profession for the new curriculum is not the only concern but the readiness of pupils too, and concern was expressed this has not been discussed on a national level. It was explained the 2 years of disruption to education has affected pupils' social development, and their ability to receive face to face education. The chief officers intend to continue to discuss this with Welsh Government, and it is also an issue of which to be mindful when Estyn undertakes inspection.

9. REVIEW STRUCTURE OF BUSINESS TEAM

DECISION

- **To note the content of the report and permit the service to move forward with the changes in order to ensure appropriate capacity.**
- **Present further report to Joint Committee at appropriate time on results of restructure.**

Discussion

Presented - Managing Director's report presenting information to Joint Committee members regarding the intention to restructure the GwE Business Team. The Joint Committee was asked to note the content of the report and permit the service to move forward with the changes in order to ensure appropriate capacity.

10. THE JOURNEY TO CURRICULUM ROLL-OUT - SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

DECISION

To accept and approve the content of the report along with the proposed activities as outlined.

Discussion

Presented - the Managing Director's report presenting information to Joint Committee members regarding the support available to schools during the next two terms to enable them to implement and deliver the new curriculum. The Joint Committee was asked to accept and approve the content of the report along with proposed activities outlined.

It was asked whether there is expectation that standards are fairly consistent across schools. In response the Primary Senior Lead noted: -

- It must be acknowledged that all schools are on a different stage of the journey, with some needing more support than others, but with this provision we hope to ensure that statutory elements are in place by September, with all schools having had the support and opportunity to go through the process.
- This also gives all schools the opportunity to embark on the planning journey, and look at the areas for training development. Many schools have already made a start on this work, and it would put all schools in a position to be able to start in September.
- It must be remembered this is only the start of the journey, and there will be much revisiting and support available so that schools can adapt and have the curriculum appropriately in place over the years ahead.

Despite the difficulties of the last 2 years, it is hoped the work has been completed so as not to have to face too many challenges between now and September. In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- Even though there is room for the local dimension, there is a formal process that everyone must follow in order to reach the destination, and that the main intention of the next series of workshops is to provide a safety network for schools so that everyone is clear as to achieving what needs to be in place.
- Quality needs to be addressed, as in recent years, but there would be very local challenges, and we all need to consider the community in which we live. The school has a community, but that community also exists within an authority community, and there is corporate discussion around curriculum leadership and the strategic direction the council wishes to follow. Therefore, it must not be assumed that schools are in a vacuum pursuing their own agenda. They are also required to work within this structure.

It was noted the biggest challenge is the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, and how schools are going to cope with this in terms of local catchment areas. In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- This challenge is on more than one level; the 3-18 community is required to have a vision for its community, or different strands will come in.
- To make the situation more complex there are some schools whose natural catchment areas cross, and also pupils moving to a new school in another county or area in north Wales.
- The question of whether skills or information are transferred, and if both, how then to incorporate the new pupil into its new community?
- Even though transition may be planned within a community, cross-community transition is vastly different, and putting the curricular vision into action will bring about many new and different challenges.

It was noted learners' resilience and the higher percentage of disengaged pupils due to the pandemic is another element that will give rise to challenges.

The Chair enquired whether the secondary sector should postpone implementation of the new curriculum for another year in order to ensure uniformity between what primary and secondary schools offer. In response, the Managing Director noted: -

- At the beginning of the current academic year many secondary schools stated their wish to deliver the curriculum in 2022, but have now reconsidered and are likely to introduce it officially from September 2023.
- The new curriculum will be a considerable transformational change, and for this to happen in depth time is required to revisit the vision, values and behaviours, converting these into a curriculum plan that will provide guidance to schools on how, and what, to plan.
- The profession is weighed down by the pressure of keeping schools open, and as September draws nearer it should be considered on the one hand what is to be gained by rushing to change things this year? On the other hand, schools must not lose momentum, especially as the inspection cycle will commence in the summer term 2022.
- There needs to be discussions with schools on an individual basis, as they are in different situations.
- Given the pressure on schools in the last 2 years in terms of managing examination years, there needs to be a full discussion on how ready they are for 2022, taking into consideration whether it would be better to use the time to mature their thoughts for 2023.

The Chair suggested it would be useful to hold a briefing session for new members regarding the new curriculum after the Elections in May.

11. LETTER TO THE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION REGARDING THE 2021-22 QUALIFICATIONS SERIES AND HIS RESPONSE

DECISION

To formally note the content of the letter.

Discussion

Presented - the Managing Director's report requesting the Joint Committee to formally note the content of a letter sent to the Minister for Education on 12 January, 2022 on behalf of the Joint Committee regarding this year's qualifications series. The Joint Committee was also asked to consider whether any further correspondence with the Minister is required following his response to the letter.

Despite the decision of Welsh Government to assess by examination this year it was noted many schools, if not the majority of schools, feel this is not appropriate in the circumstances.

The Chair noted everyone shares these concerns, stating it would be interesting to see what assurance the Minister for Education will be able to give members in his meeting with them following this meeting.

Appreciation of the letter sent to the Minister on behalf of members was expressed, and it was noted it reflects the mature collaboration within GwE.

12. INFORMATION SHARING AGREEMENT REGARDING REGION'S PUPILS

DECISION

To note the content of the report.

Discussion

Presented - the Managing Director's report presenting information to Joint Committee members regarding information sharing agreement between local authorities and GwE.

13. CALENDAR OF MEETINGS FOR 2022-23

DECISION

- **To approve the calendar of meetings as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.**
- **Authorise the Managing Director to move the meeting already scheduled for May this year to the beginning of June, if required, in consultation with the Management Board, depending on the situation regarding reallocation of education portfolios in the authorities following the election.**
- **Authorise the 2022/23 Chair to make amendments to the calendar in Appendix 1, if required.**

Discussion

Presented - the Managing Director's report requesting the Joint Committee to agree on the calendar of meetings for the coming year, and authorise the Chair to make amendments to the calendar if required.

In response to a question, it was confirmed a Joint Committee meeting has already been scheduled for May this year, but it is possible this will need to be rescheduled for the

beginning of June, depending on the situation regarding reallocation of education portfolios in the authorities following the election.

The Chair thanked everyone for their input during the last 5 years, and to the democracy service officers and translators for their services.

The meeting started at 9.30am and concluded at 11.10am.

CHAIR