
GWE JOINT COMMITTEE – 15/02/23

Present:

Councillors: Julie Fallon (Chair) (Conwy County Borough Council)
Gill German (Vice-chair) (Denbighshire Council)

Beca Brown (Cyngor Gwynedd), Ieuan Williams (Isle of Anglesey County Council) and Phil Wynn (Wrexham County Borough Council).

Co-opted Members Without a Vote: Dylan Davies (Secondary Schools Representative).

Officers without a vote: Dr Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire County Council), Marc Berw Hughes (Isle of Anglesey County Council), Garem Jackson (Cyngor Gwynedd) Dafydd Ifans (Wrexham County Borough Council) and Geraint Davies (Denbighshire Council).

Officers in attendance:

GwE – Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director), Alwyn Jones (Assistant Director), Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager).

Cyngor Gwynedd, the Host Authority – Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department), Siôn Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant), Rhodri Jones and Einir Davies (Democracy Services Officers).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Ian Roberts (Flintshire County Council).

Condolences were extended to the family of the late Jonathan Morgan, the Headteacher of Ysgol Y Gogarth, Llandudno and an active member of the GwE joint committee, who had died recently. He was thanked for years of commitment throughout his career as a teacher and as a member of this Joint Committee.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

3. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent matters were raised.

4. MINUTES

It was confirmed that the minutes presented from the meeting held on 23 November, 2022 were correct.

5. 2022-2023 BUDGET: QUARTER 3 MONITORING

The report was submitted by the Head of Finance Department. Attention was drawn to the following main points:

- It was anticipated that the GwE budget would be in a fairly neutral position at the end of the current financial year.
- It was confirmed that there was an underspend of £27,400 from the full budget of £17,993,147 and that GwE was spending in accordance with the budget.
- It was noted that this was substantially lower than the Quarter 2 review, when an underspend of £90,000 had been anticipated for the year. GwE had managed to reduce underspend levels by recruiting staff to vacant posts.

RESOLVED

To accept and approve the report for the Third Quarter of the GwE budget for the 2022/2023 financial year.

6. GwE BUDGET 2023-24 (BASELINE BUDGET)

The report was submitted by the Head of Finance Department. Attention was drawn briefly to the following principal points:

- It was noted that this budget was operational from 1 April 2023 until 31 March 2024.
- A suggestion was made to establish a baseline budget of the same figure as this year's budget. This was a total of £17,993,147.
- It was confirmed that this budget reflected the Councils' decision not to add inflation in full. This meant that there had been a 5.25% cut to the budget compared to 2022/23 following an increase in costs. It was detailed that this was equivalent to £206,000.
- It was explained that the Pension Fund was reviewed every three years and that the results of the latest review would be enforced on 1 April 2023. As the fund was currently in a healthy position, there would be a reduction of £103,964 in GwE's contribution as an employer. It was confirmed that this was half the deficit created by inflation, reducing the cut faced to 2.60%. There would be a need to ensure that savings are made to address the remaining deficit of £102,112 in the budget.
- Reference was made to the contributions from the Councils to the GwE budget. It was stated that the total provided was £3,924,269 between the six Councils. It was confirmed that this was the same figure as the current financial year. Despite this, there would be a minor adjustment in the contribution of individual councils due to changes in population levels.

RESOLVED

To adopt the baseline budget for the 2023/24 budgetary year as submitted in Appendix 1 of the report.

7. 2022-2023 BUSINESS PLAN: QUARTER 3 MONITORING

The report was submitted by the Managing Director of GwE. Attention was drawn to the following points:

- It was explained that this relevant period (October – December 2022) had been a very busy period with many schools witnessing some normality returning following the Covid-19 period.
- It was noted that new procedures had been enforced to ensure that schools reviewed performance and self-assessed accountability.

- Reference was made to an important conference held across the region, which focused on reintroducing systems to bridge primary and secondary education.
- It was confirmed that one of the main risks recently was leadership succession on all levels in the system. It was noted that a quarter of secondary school headteachers in North Wales had retired within the past year. It was also noted that there was currently a shortage of supply teachers and schools had difficulty releasing teachers to attend key training.
- It was emphasised that GwE's relationship with schools was very good despite these staffing issues.

Members of the Joint Committee were given an opportunity to share observations and ask questions:

- Details were provided about the 'Strategy to support parents' involvement in the community' within Objective 4 of the plan: 'Strong and Inclusive Schools' enquiring what work was being undertaken to ensure developments within the strategy.
 - In response to the query, GwE's Managing Director confirmed that there was close collaboration between GwE, parents and learners to ensure that materials were available to them. It was elaborated that work was being carried out with the Welsh Government in an attempt to see how this collaboration would happen socially as it was not yet clear. It was emphasised that good work was being undertaken in schools on an individual level to develop this strategy, but a clear plan was needed for the future on how to implement it on a community and regional level.
- It was proposed that a further discussion was held on the strategy by GwE's Management Board to share good practices and ideas and to ensure that the plan and strategy were strong and effective.
 - In response to this proposal, GwE's Managing Director confirmed that it would be possible to discuss this matter further by the summer period as clearer policies would be available at that time for consideration.
- It was agreed that inequality and attendance were key matters following the Covid period. The safety of children was another factor.
- It was elaborated that one obstacle in terms of planning this strategy was that the budget from the Welsh Government was for a fixed period. It was believed that this caused recruitment difficulties as it was not possible to plan for the long term.
- It was noted that strong measures were needed to protect leaders and it was mentioned that the young workforce were also leaving their posts due to work pressures. It was noted that misconceptions were being shared about careers in the teaching field and that the mindset needed to change.

Gratitude was expressed for the report.

RESOLVED

- **To approve and accept the monitoring report for quarter 3.**
- **Further discussion on the 'Strategy to support parents' involvement in the community' within Objective 4 of the plan: 'Strong and Inclusive Schools' at a future Joint Committee meeting.**

8. WRITTEN STATEMENT: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE – MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND THE WELSH LANGUAGE

The report was submitted by the Managing Director of GwE. Attention was drawn to the following main points:

- It was confirmed that the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language had issued a written statement: 'School improvement and the information landscape' on 19 January 2023, which outlined the next steps in terms of developing a new data and information ecosystem / landscape. This update was submitted for information to the Members.
- It was explained that the written statement detailed the new information system for schools and shared recommendations on the accountability levels of schools.
- Members were reminded of the unexpected announcement that a 'Capped 9 Points Score' system would return as an accountability measure from summer 2023 onwards. This measure would create a score based on the results of 9 GCSE qualifications or equivalent qualification.
- It was elaborated that the Welsh Government had confirmed that two working groups would be established, with practitioners in schools and local authorities collaborating on a vision of how schools' accountability should look in future.
- Reference was made to a 'sampling' system that would also be implemented. This would be used for schools and officers to share ideas and contribute to improve the system through examples of good practice.
- It was noted that careful action must be taken when accountability measures were introduced as it was possible that schools would compete against each other rather than work together, share ideas and implement good practices.
- It was emphasised that a statement had been released by ESTYN's Chief Inspector, confirming that inspections would operate in the same manner as current processes.

Members of the Joint Committee were given an opportunity to share observations and ask questions:

Disappointment and frustration were expressed that local authorities, schools and the Regional Consortium were not consulted about these updates. It was noted that the timing of the announcement caused concern as it had been issued in the middle of an academic year and soon after the results of early examinations.

It was emphasised that headteachers and teachers had felt pressured recently as a result of matters such as behaviour and attendance, and reintroducing the 'Capped 9 Points Score' arrangement could add to this.

It was confirmed that some members of the Joint Committee would meet the Minister in March and concerns about the situation would be shared at that time. It was proposed to hold an additional meeting of the Joint Committee following this meeting in order to have a further discussion about education in North Wales, and to ensure considerations to improve the system and understand accountability measures, and to invite the Minister to the meeting for observations. Following that meeting, the Joint Committee would be able to share a statement on behalf of the region's schools should members deem it appropriate.

RESOLVED

This item was presented for information to members. Resolved to invite the Minister for the Welsh Language and Education to an extraordinary meeting of the Joint Committee for a discussion on education across the north Wales region.

9. 'EIN LLAIS NI' PROJECT

The report was presented by the Assistant Director of GwE. Attention was drawn briefly to the following principal points:

- It was confirmed that the aim of the project was to assist pupils to develop oracy skills in Welsh by offering ideas and strategies to nurture speaking and reading skills.
- It was noted that a number of schools had stated the need to develop their pupils' oracy skills in Welsh. This was particularly true following the Covid period and specifically in non-Welsh speaking families as pupils had not received the opportunity to practise their skills.
- The Joint Committee was reminded that the project's initial work had been undertaken in consultation with Welsh-medium and bilingual schools and with Professor Enlli Thomas, who was an international expert on bilingual education.
- It was detailed that the project had received support from the Welsh Government by means of a grant in October 2021. It was also noted that a steering group had been established for the project, which included the following members – school headteachers, a representative of the Management Board, GwE's Managing Director, Councillor Ian Roberts on behalf of the Gwe Joint Committee and Professor Enlli Thomas.
- Pride was shared that schools had shared the project's successes in workshops last term. This showed that the strategies introduced as part of the project had been successful in developing the children's skills.
- Following the project's successes, it was noted that an application had been made to extend the project to more Welsh-medium and bilingual schools, as well as English-medium schools. An additional allocation of up to £272,000 from the Welsh Government had been received to further develop and extend the work.

RESOLVED

To approve the content of the report and the plans to develop the project in accordance with the targets set by the Welsh Government.

10. 2023-2024 MEETINGS CALENDAR

The report was submitted by the Managing Director of GwE as an item for information only.

Consideration was given to hold the next meeting of the Joint Committee in multi-locations on May 24.

RESOLVED

To agree on the Joint Committee meetings calendar for the 2023-24 year.

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 12:00pm.

CHAIR