
GWE JOINT COMMITTEE 15/07/20

Present:

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

Co-opted non-voting Members: Jonathan Morgan (Special Schools' Representative).

Non-voting Officers: Rhys Howard Hughes (Anglesey County Council), Jo Moore (on behalf of Karen Evans, Denbighshire County Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire County Council) and Garem Jackson (Gwynedd Council).

Also present: Arwyn Thomas (Managing Director, GwE), Dafydd L. Edwards (Gwynedd Council Head of Finance, Host Authority), Sion Huws (Senior Lawyer - Corporate, Gwynedd Council, Host Authority), Susan Owen (Business Manager, GwE), Annwen Morgan (Chief Executive, Anglesey County Council), Alwyn Jones (Assistant Director, GwE), Gareth Williams (Chair of GwE Advisory Board), Hywyn Jones (Gwynedd Council Senior Accountant), Gwion Jones (Senior Accountant, Gwynedd Council), Bethan Roberts (Performance Management Manager, GwE) and Eirian Roberts (Gwynedd Council Democracy Team Officer, Host Authority).

Announcements

Claire Homard was congratulated upon her appointment as Chairperson of GwE Management Board, and Garem Jackson as Vice-Chair, for a period of two years.

Best wishes were given to Ian Roberts (Wrexham County Borough Council) on his retirement, and also to Haf Williams (Primary Schools' Representative) at the start of a 12-month secondment with the National Academy. It was agreed to send a letter to both of them, on behalf of the Joint Committee members, wishing them well and thanking them for their work. It was noted that a new primary representative would possibly need to be appointed on the Joint Committee.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Rosalind Williams (Church in Wales), Haf Williams (Primary Schools' Representative), Claire Armitsted (Secondary Schools' Representative), Karen Evans (Denbighshire Council), and Ian Roberts (Wrexham County Borough Council).

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 on 20 May 2020.

Matter arising from the minutes:
Item 7 - Qualifications

GwE's Managing Director noted that there had been no solution to the concerns as regards what will happen in August around the results, nor how 2021 will look for learners, and that everybody at every level is trying to get an answer from Qualifications Wales.

The Chairperson reiterated this comment, and specific reference was made to concerns in relation to this year's examination system, as regards where the responsibility lies for results. It was noted that a meeting would soon be held with Qualifications Wales, the Minister and Cabinet Members to discuss the matter.

5. JOINT COMMITTEE FINAL ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2020

DECISION

To accept and note GwE's Statement of Accounts (subject to audit) for 2019/20.

Discussion

Presented - report from the Head of Finance, Gwynedd Council, asking the Joint Committee to accept and note GwE's Statement of Accounts for 20019/20 (subject to audit) endorsed by the Statutory Finance Officer for the Joint Committee.

It was noted:

- That the final net underspend for 2019/20 stands at £189,618 and that the 'out-turn' report presented to the Joint Committee on 20 May 2020 elaborates on the reasons for the net underspend and the intended use of the balance.
- That the Statement of Accounts was already the subject of an audit by Deloitte, Gwynedd Council external auditors, appointed by Auditor General Wales. In light of the pandemic, Local Welsh Government audits would not be completed finally until September of this year. The Auditors would produce an 'ISA 260' report, detailing the main findings by Deloitte, to be presented to this Joint Committee at the next meeting on 15 September 2020.

The additional revenue following underspend in 2019/20 was welcomed.

6. GOVERNANCE STATEMENT FOR GWE JOINT COMMITTEE

DECISION

To accept and approve the Annual Governance Statement.

Discussion

Presented - GwE Managing Director's report asking the Joint Committee to accept and approve the Annual Governance Statement.

GwE's Managing Director noted that this report tied in with the last part of the Annual Report (item 7 below), and with items 8, 9 and 10. In light of this, it was suggested to move forwards to item 7 and make a decision on items 6 and 7 together at the end.

He further noted that there is a need to look at the net underspend for 2019/20, and draw everything together in order to re-focus on how the service will look as we move forwards.

7. GWE ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

DECISION

To approve and accept the report.

Discussion

Presented - GwE Managing Director's report asking the Joint Committee to accept and approve GwE's Annual Report for the financial year 2019/20.

GwE's Managing Director noted that the last part of the Annual Report referred to the priorities of the Business Plan for 2020/21, however in light of COVID-19 that these priorities needed to be reviewed. The horizon was clear back in March, however this was not the case now, and a discussion needed to take place to see what the focus of the service will be in moving forwards. Evidently, technology was a matter that should be addressed.

The Joint Committee accepted and approved the Governance Statement (item 6 above) and the Annual Report, noting that the discussion paper would be presented at the next meeting on 15 September 2020, in terms of the next priorities that need to be agreed. The Managing Director further noted that the service has had to change direction 5 times in one term, and that lessons need to be learned from the lockdown and a new vision set for the service as we progress in the short term and over the coming years. He also referred to the collaboration with the authorities, noting that there are local solutions in terms of collaboration that suit North Wales better than that proposed by Welsh Government.

8. GwE WORK PROGRAMME

DECISION

To accept the content of the report.

Discussion

Presented - a report by GwE's Assistant Director setting out information for Joint Committee members on GwE's work programme for the period 12 March 2020 to 22 May 2020, as regards responding to COVID-19.

GwE's Assistant Director noted that some of the report was dated and gave an overview of what had happened during the lockdown. He also referred to the work recently undertaken (as noted in the report under item 10). He added that the intention was to present a more detailed report at the next meeting on 15 September 2020, giving a taster of what has been undertaken in terms of supporting schools and collaborating with the authorities during the current half term. This period has been a learning curve for all.

GwE's Managing Director and Chairperson reiterated these comments and emphasised that one of the strongest features running throughout the presentations at this meeting was that collaboration with the six authorities across North Wales, despite always being positive, had progressed to another level during the current crisis, and that schools have benefited from this at several levels.

Comments arising from the discussion:

- It was noted that the relationship between GwE and the authorities has been very positive, particularly as regards the risk assessments. This had alleviated pressure from schools and heads, and there was a desire to see this collaboration continuing and further developing in future.
- In response to a question about teachers' digital skills, GwE's Managing Director noted that everybody's technical and digital skills, including teachers, had developed during this period. Increasing use of technology would become essential in future, and there was room to use technology to strengthen the relationship between the school and home.

9. BLENDED LEARNING

DECISION

To note and accept the content of the report.

Discussion

Presented - a report by GwE's Assistant Director setting out information for Joint Committee members on the lead document 'Developing integrated approaches to support blended learning for the phased opening of schools'.

GwE's Assistant Director noted that vast materials had been produced during this time, which could be shared with Joint Committee members in the autumn.

The Chairperson thanked GwE and the officers and schools that have been collaborating to bring this report together. It was noted that years of work had been compacted into a few weeks, and that this report would be a valuable resource in future.

10. NORTH WALES MODEL FOR RE-OPENING SCHOOLS

DECISION

(a) Support the regional approach and model, with GwE, Local Authorities and schools working in partnership to ensure that learners' individual needs are met in an individual local context.

(b) In order to allow schools to prepare and plan, seek clarity from WJEC and Qualifications Wales regarding their plans for summer 2021 as soon as possible.

Discussion

Presented - report by GwE's Managing Director and Management Board Chairperson presenting a discussion paper in relation to a North Wales Model for Re-opening Schools. The Joint Committee was asked to support the regional approach and model, with GwE, Local Authorities and schools working in partnership to ensure that learners' individual needs are met in an individual local context.

The Chairperson of GwE's Management Board noted that schools are looking forward to September however that caution needs to be taken and that schools would need to assess their pupils' fitness for learning before introducing any new learning. He also emphasised that it is extremely important that the considerable expenditure needed in this respect be targeted appropriately, and that the regions are entitled to decide how best to allocate the money. He added that Welsh Government acknowledges that the work in North Wales is driving the agenda, and that they are eager to roll this out across Wales.

Comments arising from the discussion -

- Considerable concern was expressed about learners' emotional well-being, children who would have disengaged from educational experiences and needing support and counselling with their experiences over the lockdown. It was noted that national funding for counselling was completely inadequate and it was noted that an element of the £29m as recently announced by the Education Minister for supporting schools to recruit, reinstate and raise standards, or other funding, should be targeted for this.
- It was emphasised that it is important that whatever happens should happen soon, so that everybody gets the opportunity to take a proper break over the summer.
- It was noted that it is clear that the secondary sector requires more support than the primary sector in terms of social distancing rules and creating bubbles etc., as secondary schools teach several different subjects. In response, it was agreed that the situation with secondary schools is much more challenging and complex, and reference was made to the Government's new guidance, which includes re-drafted risk assessments.
- The importance of ensuring that schools do not use this additional funding to fund gaps in their budgets was emphasised. In response, it was noted that Welsh Government had clearly stated that this is a separate pot of money, which was not available to fund gaps in budgets, or to prevent redundancies, and that schools must clearly show how the money will be used.
- It was noted that clarity is needed regarding the situation of those pupils in years 11 and 13 in 2021. In response, it was noted that lack of information about any possible adjustment to the qualifications would stop schools from preparing and planning appropriately.
- Reference was made to the importance of work in conjunction with Bangor University to develop children and young people's literacy and numeracy.

- In response to a question regarding the situation facing teachers and children in September, it was emphasised that the situation would not be as simple as '*catching up*', and that pupils would require continuous support for the foreseeable future. Members could be updated at the next Joint Committee meeting on 15 September 2020, with a fuller report given on the situation further along in the autumn.

The meeting commenced at 1.30 pm and concluded at 2.50 pm

CHAIRPERSON