

Scrutiny Investigation - Education Support Services

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Content

The Report	Page
1. Context	3
2. Purpose of the Scrutiny Investigation	4
3. Main Activity of the Investigation	4
4. Main Findings	6
5. The Recommendations of the Investigation	9
Appendices	
Appendix 1 - The Questions from the Investigation's Members for the school visits	*
Appendix 2 - Summary of the main messages that derived from the school visits	*
Appendix 3 - Questions to further challenge Cynnal's work	*
Appendix 4 - Gwynedd Council's Service Level Agreement with Cynnal (2017/18)	*
Appendix 5 - Questions sent to other Education Authorities in Wales on their support services	*
Appendix 6	
Appendix 7	

1. Context

- 1.1 The Education Authority has broad responsibilities to provide support services for the county's main education providers for our children, and our primary, secondary and special schools. This is in fields such as advisory services for advice and improvement, special educational needs and inclusion, along with other support services.
- 1.2 The Education Authority has a budget of £17.872m that has not been devolved to schools to meet these responsibilities and these budgets are under immense pressure in terms of the demand for services and also the pressure to shrink budgets due to the financial challenge that faces the Council. The Investigation also considered other education support services within the £71.313m that has been devolved to schools which schools then buy back from the Authority.
- 1.3 The Education Quality Scrutiny Investigation had identified the need to define very clearly what the role of the Education Authority was in terms of the standard of Education and, specifically, establishing a very clear understanding of the contact between the Authority and schools in the quality field.
- 1.4 This investigation, which its recommendations received a warm welcome, confirmed that what happens in the classroom is what is key to the quality of education. However, it also emphasised the importance of the elements "outside of the classroom" to support this, for example, matters such as school leadership. It is possible for elements of school work "outside of the classroom" to hinder the nature and quality of the learning.
- 1.5 Therefore, what happens outside the classroom has a substantial influence, be it positive or negative, on pupils' experiences and, in light of this, on their ability to confirm and achieve their potential. It is therefore key that the Education Authority is as certain as possible that what is in place to support the work on grass root-level in the schools does this and not only places an additional burden which fights against the classroom provision.
- 1.6 The background to this Investigation is a very clear desire to ensure that the support services provided to the schools offer what is needed to support quality learning at grass-root level and provide value for money at a time when resources are rare.
- 1.7 In order to do this, the Investigation has focused on the main sources of these support services, they have weighed up the logic behind the provision and have asked questions about the suitability of this provision for present and future requirements for the well-being of the pupils within the education system.

2 Purpose of the Scrutiny Investigation

2.1 The Services Scrutiny Committee, which has now been succeeded by the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee, agreed to the scope for the Investigation which noted the following:

2.2 In the first place, it was noted that the Investigation would attempt to establish an understanding regarding:

- What were the expectations (statutory and others) on the Education Authority in the various support areas
- Who provided these services and how was the Council ensuring high quality services for our children and schools?
- Which needs was the Authority trying to meet in these areas and to what extent were the Authority's current arrangements achieving that
- The link between the services the Authority provides and the needs of the county's pupils
- Which challenges was the Authority facing when providing these support services now and in the future
- What were the Authority's current arrangements in these areas and what was good practice in other areas to provide services in these areas?

2.3 Then, it was noted that the Investigation would attempt to answer the following questions:

- What kind of changes, if any, were needed in the services, so that they could fulfil their purpose and be sustainable for the future?
- What other possible models were available to provide these services?

3 Main Activity of the Investigation

3.1 Following an early discussion with the Cabinet Member for Education and the Head of Education, the Investigation decided to focus, initially, on the main sources of support services that are available to schools. This led to focusing the attention on GwE and Cynnal services and on the Education Authority's own Support services.

3.2 The Investigation met on seven / eight occasions, in addition to a series of visits that are mentioned in paragraph 3.4 below. This included many discussions with the Cabinet Member for Education, the Head of Education, senior managers and relevant managers. In addition, managers from the Education Service and other departments contributed towards the work of

the Investigation by discussing openly with the Investigation's leading and support officers.

- 3.3 The Investigation carried out research work on patterns in other counties to see whether lessons could be learned that could improve the provision within the county. This meant contacting the 22 education authorities in Wales to ask about their arrangements for support services. 12 responses were received from those enquiries.
- 3.4 However, the core of the Investigation's work was a series of meetings held between the members of the Investigation and various school Headteachers across the county. These discussions were held in 17 different schools. Six of them were secondary schools and the rest were primary schools which varied in terms of which category they had been placed by the Authority; red, amber, yellow or green.
- 3.5 The purpose of these visits was to establish what the grass-roots experience of the Headteachers was in regard to the nature and effectiveness of the support they were receiving from GwE, Cynnal and the Education Authority itself.
- 3.6 The leaflets used as a driver to the discussions in these meetings are appended as Appendix 1 in this document. Appendix 2 then summarises the main messages that derived from these interviews which then led to initial conclusions and further work by the Investigation.
- 3.7 The Investigation's opinion was that the main element calling for further attention was Cynnal's work and to hold a further meeting with Cynnal's new Chief Executive, the Senior Manager who is responsible for the Council's Central Information Technology Unit and the Schools' Senior Manager. Appendix 3 notes the set of questions suggested for this meeting.
- 3.8 In addition to addressing the main three sources of support services, the Investigation also looked at the following:
 - a) the recent development of the Area Offices (see 3.9 below)
 - b) the provision of Hwb and Hwb+ as a resource to support education (see 3.10 below)
 - c) the procedures for providing supply teachers (see 3.11 below)
- 3.9 During the Investigation's work, the Education Authority decided to change some of its arrangements for supporting work in the schools by introducing, for a period of time, arrangements for area offices. The Education Department had been consulting with the Investigation about the type of support services that should be provided from area offices as the arrangement was being established.
- 3.10 During the school visits, the Members learnt a little more about the provision of Hwb and Hwb+ which is a provision that offers, amongst many other things, convenient access to teaching resources that already exist, which could reduce the workload for teachers outside the classroom. The

Investigation asked for a further presentation on Hwb and Hwb+ to assess the contribution that this could make towards reducing the burden on the front line.

- 3.11 Another matter the Investigation had considered was the system for providing supply teachers. Given the current squeeze on budgets and the fact that some councils experiment with new methods of providing supply teachers, the Investigation decided to ask questions about the current provision and to look at whether there were any other realistic options to meet the need.
- 3.12 The main conclusions of the Investigation are noted below along with supporting evidence, followed by the Investigation's subsequent recommendation.

4 Main Findings of the Investigation

GwE

- 4.1 The Education Authority's relationship with GwE is complicated. As it happens, Gwynedd Council is GwE's Lead Authority but, in reality, the Council's relationship with GwE is the same as the relationship of every other Education Authority. This means that the Council has a seat on GwE's joint committee. Consequently, the Authority gets an input into GwE's Business Plan and, specifically, into the provision offer that GwE places before individual Education Authorities. On top of this, the Authority then can commission specific work for the county based on Gwynedd's specific assessment needs.
- 4.2 Therefore, in theory, the system is in place in order to ensure, on one hand, the influence of Gwynedd's Education Department on GwE's generic programme for all of north Wales and, on the other hand, a clear commission by the Authority for these elements that need specific attention within the county. However, the efficiency of these arrangements are not clear or known and, therefore, this is a field which deserves specific scrutiny attention for the future (See recommendation 5.1 below).
- 4.4 The Services provided by GwE are a significant investment. These services cost £640,496 to the Education Authority in the 2017/18 financial year. At a time where resources are so rare, the Council has to ensure and satisfy itself on this provision's value for money and efficiency.

Cynnal

- 4.5 It was apparent from the discussions within the Investigation and, specifically, from the discussions with the schools, that specific attention needed to be given to Cynnal services which is managed through a Service Level Agreement. (See the Service Level Agreement for 2017/18 in Appendix 4). By doing so, it was important to remember that Cynnal was originally established to provide Information Technology consultative and support services across Gwynedd and Anglesey but, by now, that the consultative services were a north Wales responsibility on GwE.

- 4.6 Therefore, it was appropriate that the Investigation asked whether Cynnal's model in its current form was a slight inheritance from Cynnal's original structure, before establishing GwE, and that there was a need to discover whether the need could be met in a different way for the present and the future.
- 4.7 The research with education authorities also showed a wide range of support structures (See Appendix 5). Varied responses were received which highlighted the different history and culture in the different areas. This included counties where an Information Technology service was provided by an internal unit within the Council, with praiseworthy feedback. Examples of collaboration across the counties were rare, such as what happens with Gwynedd and Anglesey (via Cynnal) but there is room to look further for good practice in terms of providing support to schools and, specifically, with a view to be progressive with regards to the type of support that is offered to schools in order to ensure that the county's schools are at the forefront in terms of taking advantage of technology to assist with quality teaching.
- 4.8 In light of this, the Investigation had been looking at collaboration between Cynnal and the internal Information Technology Unit, and the need for clarity on who leads on specific elements. In short, it is a partition where the Central Unit is responsible for the infrastructure in terms of the network and Cynnal is then responsible for supporting the hardware and software within the walls of the school. However, as is often the case in the field of Technology, it is not always as simple as that. In having assurance of good co-operation, it appears that there is no need for structural change, which could take time and resources, but it must be ensured that the collaboration takes place (see Recommendation 5.2 below).
- 4.9 The services provided by Cynnal cost £91,198 for Gwynedd's Education Department and £437,444 for Gwynedd schools in the 2017/18 financial year, and therefore it is a significant investment. During a period of hardship on Council resources, value for money and efficiency of this provision must be ensured. However, it is fair to note that the income anticipated from other counties (by Schools and Education Authorities) to which Cynnal will attract is approximately £466,000 for the 2017/18 financial year and therefore will provide savings to Gwynedd and Anglesey in terms of the cost of provision.

Education Authority's Support Service

- 4.10 The Service Level Agreement between the Education Authority and the schools offers a wide variety of services that are provided by the Council. *% of the County's schools are using the Service Level Agreement with the Authority to meet their needs and, generally, although several were able to point to examples of what is seen as a delay, it appears that the services were fairly satisfactory. It will be important that those services, like all other central service comes under the microscope of Ffordd Gwynedd in order to offer greater efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of those services.

Area Offices

- 4.11 In September 2016, the Council Cabinet approved establishing the Area Offices arrangement. The aim of the decision was to trial a system that would take some of the administrative and managerial burden from schools by centralising those responsibilities in three area offices and, by doing so, releasing Headteachers to lead in their schools. It is early days in regards to implementing this and, as a result of staff unsteadiness, the system has not been in full operation yet and therefore it has not achieved its full potential.
- 4.12 However, it is a very expensive system (approximately £275,000 per year for three years) and therefore, it is crucial that arrangements are in place to assess the value of the trial and then a speedy decision on its future.

Hwb and Hwb+

- 4.13 After receiving a presentation on the provision of Hwb and Hwb+, the Investigation saw two main issues. First, what is being proposed can be valuable but, secondly, it is quite obvious from the statistics submitted to the Investigation that the use made of it varied significantly from schools that use it as a main vehicle for media and teaching resources and managing the work of children to schools that, to all purposes, have decided not to use it at all.
- 4.14 At a time of financial shrinkage and great pressure on staff time within the classroom, it is important that schools take advantage of any opportunities available not to "re-invent the wheel". There is therefore an obvious place to raise awareness among schools of the support available on Hwb and Hwb+ and also asked questions to schools if they do not take advantage of the provision and thereby creating extra work for themselves.

Supply Teachers

- 4.15 As already noted in 3.11 above, the arrangement for the provision of supply teachers is expensive for the Education Authority and the individual schools (a total of approximately £ *** per year). This has also been the subject of discussion at national level where the Welsh Government has identified the need to get an alternative system in its place and has commissioned a review and invited proposals for pilot plans to trial different arrangements.
- 4.16 The Investigation has heard about the experiences of some other Education Authorities in Wales and beyond who have experimented with outsourcing the service by making significant financial savings. Although this is very attractive at first glance, the Investigation has also received evidence about problems with the quality of the outsourced provision and also there are concerns about the ability to ensure that the requirements of Gwynedd and Anglesey in terms of the ability to teach through the medium of Welsh is protected in any new arrangement. The Investigation has noted the Education Authority's decision not to submit a proposal to the Welsh Government in order to implement a pilot cluster scheme but will need to keep a close eye on the plans that are being implemented and assess what might work in Gwynedd and Anglesey's specific situation.

5 Recommendations

5.1 GwE Services

Findings

- a) The pattern and nature of the services offered by GwE has developed and matured since the early days of the organisation so that greater emphasis is now on encouraging and supporting improvement. It also appears that the relationship between challenge advisers with individual schools is developing well although, quite naturally, not in every case.
- b) The model for reaching an agreement for the services provided (Education Authorities commissioning and GwE providing) is simple in theory but it is not clear to everyone.
- c) It is extremely important to ensure that what is provided by GwE meets the county's educational needs and that the commissioning arrangements identify and convey these needs.

Evidence

- Include interviews with school Headteachers about the relationship with GwE.
- Factual information on the nature of the agreement between the individual Education Departments and GwE in addition to the cost of this provision.

Recommendations to the Cabinet Member

It is recommended that the Cabinet Member:

- a) establish clarity in GwE discussions, while dialogue with GwE about the requirements are important, clear priority should be given to meeting the educational needs of the commissioning education authorities, in order to ensure the proper use of this expensive resource which is paid for by Education authorities
- b) Report soon to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee on the model for the commissioning of GwE services and, crucially, on the content of the commission's draft by Gwynedd's Education Authority to GwE for the next period.

5.2 Cynnal

Findings

- a) Although Cynnal's model is one which was established in a very different context (in terms of the type of services provided), the model still is sensible insofar as, if it did not exist, it would be sensible to establish something similar as it:
 - can give particular attention to the needs of supporting and developing Information Technology at schools
 - ensure the development and sharing of expertise across the two counties by ensuring some degree of savings of scale and reduce costs as a result
 - attract income from other counties which reduces the core costs of the services to the two counties that own the company

- b) There is scope for Cynnal to be more progressive yet in terms of the support packages and systems that are being offered to the schools in order to support and develop the teaching in the classroom
- c) There is scope to strengthen the mutual understanding and collaboration work between Cynnal and the central Information Technology Unit within the Council in order to ensure a better understanding of each of their responsibilities, collaborating develop solutions to the needs of schools and look for opportunities to reduce costs, with the Central Education Office co-ordinating these discussions.

5 Recommendations

5. GwE Services

1

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2

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Evidence

- Include interviews with school Headteachers about the relationship with Cynnal.
- Intense discussions with Cynnal's Chief Executive, the Senior Manager who is responsible for the Council's Central Information Technology Unit, and the Schools' Senior Manager.

Recommendations to the Cabinet Member:

- a) Although it would be possible to consider structural changes to attempt to reduce costs, he/she should not make any changes at this stage until recommendation b) below has been implemented and has had the opportunity to come to fruition
- b) he/she directs the Department's Central Education Office to have regular discussions with Cynnal's Chief Executive and the Senior Manager who is responsible for the Central Information Technology Unit to search for opportunities to improve collaborative working, find savings and develop the service offered to schools
- c) he/she asks Cynnal's Chief Executive to regularly report to Cynnal's Board / Joint Committee on innovative developments to support teaching in the classroom.

5.3 The Authority's Services

Findings

- a) The vast majority of schools in general are satisfied with the services offered under the Service Level Agreement with the Authority and there are very few other possibilities available for accessing those services anyway
- b) All internal services within the Council, in turn, follows the procedures of Ffordd Gwynedd of challenging what they are doing

Evidence

- Include interviews with school Headteachers on the implementation of the Service Level Agreement with the Authority
- Information on the responsibility on all Council departments to establish a plan to critically look at all their arrangements through the Ffordd Gwynedd method.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member

Not to propose any changes to the Service Level Agreements that are being offered to schools but wait to see what improvements/cost reductions the review work of the Council's internal services will produce for schools.

5.4 Area Offices

Findings

- a) There is clear and strong logic behind the idea of establishing Area Offices to centralise responsibilities and thus releasing Headteachers to lead in their schools.
- b) The arrangement is a new and expensive one, but it has not yet had an opportunity to realise its potential

Evidence

- A report to Gwynedd Council's Cabinet in September 2016 on the debate over establishing an Area Offices arrangement, and the temporary cost of this
- Include individual interviews with School Headteachers on the need to reduce administrative and managerial burden on schools
- Discussions in a specific meeting of the Investigation to look at the options in terms of matters that could be centralised to Area Offices

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member

He/she will report back to the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee at the beginning of 2018/19 to assess the evidence of the success of the trial in terms of reducing the burden on schools with a recommendation then to the Council's Cabinet on whether the system should continue and, if so, how it is to be funded within the education budget.

5.5 Hwb and Hwb+

Findings

- a) After an uncertain start, Hwb and Hwb+, has now developed to be a resource that could be very useful to schools should it be owned and used to its full potential
- b) There is wide variation in the use of the resource by schools, with a significant number of schools making barely any use of it at all meaning that there may be some elements of work that are unnecessarily duplicated and re-invented

Evidence

- A presentation on the provision of Hwb and Hwb+ for the Investigation
- Include individual interviews with school Headteachers on the use made by schools of the Hwb and Hwb+ provision
- Written evidence on the number of schools making use of the resource and for what

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member

He/she to ask the Education Authority officials, in conjunction with Cynnal, to conduct a campaign to raise awareness about what Hwb+ can contribute to reduce burdens on schools, and question schools that barely make any use of it, or no use at all.

5.6 Supply Teachers

Findings

- a) The cost of the supply teacher system to the Education Authority and the schools is very significant and there is a theoretical opportunity to make very substantial savings as a consequence
- b) It appears that efforts in other areas to find alternative ways of supplying the service, by outsourcing to an external agency, have highlighted risks in terms of ensuring an appropriate supply of supply teachers and, in particular, the supply of teachers to teach through the medium of Welsh
- c) An initial assessment of Welsh Government's invitation on experimental plans in the area offers the possibility, but not certainty, of finding a solution that might be suitable for the Gwynedd and Môn local situation.

Evidence

- Factual information presented to the Investigation on the current arrangements and the cost of the provision.
- A document by Welsh Government, inviting innovating offers to be trialled in order to provide supply teachers.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member

That he/she acknowledges that we must take a fresh look at the existing supply teachers system and keep a close eye on innovative schemes resulting from Welsh Government's invitation for innovative schemes in order to see whether an appropriate solution can be developed for the needs of Gwynedd and Anglesey.