

GwE review of progress. October 2019.

Background and evidence base

I met with a range of senior colleagues from GwE who briefed me on developments since my last review in the Autumn of 2018. In addition, I met with some Supporting Improvement Advisers (SIAs) and with the key officers from GwE who lead on:

- the peer engagement initiatives,
- the support for Curriculum for Wales,
- the Formative Assessment Action Research Project and
- the Additional Learning Needs Transformation Initiative.

I also spoke with:

- a group of headteachers (primary and secondary) from a number of different local authorities in the region;
- the education portfolio holders for two local authorities – who are also the chair and vice-chair of the GwE Joint Committee; and
- chair of the GwE Management Board (one of the Directors of Education - via a telephone call).

In addition, staff from GwE also demonstrated to me the progress made on the G6 tool since last year and also the tracker software which is now used in more than 40% of the schools.

Overall observations.

I was greatly encouraged by my visit. When I reviewed the work of GwE last year, it was already making strong progress in its agreed direction of travel but since then the progress has either been significantly accelerated or has, at the very least, continued steadily. GwE is continuing along its three-stage journey from having a prime focus on challenge and monitoring to a prime focus on supporting improvement towards a main focus on building capacity for a self-improving system.

It was encouraging to hear from the headteachers about the transformation in approach that has happened in GwE in recent years and their strong endorsement of the quality of the support they receive. It was also good to hear the positive feedback from portfolio holders and the director of education who are all absolutely convinced that GwE provides good value for money. SIAs and other GwE colleagues also spoke in very positive terms about the shift in culture in GwE and how they feel more empowered and less isolated. There was no aspect of the work that I investigated where I was disappointed about progress, though a number of challenges remain.

Grounds for optimism/areas of strength

1. **Leadership and culture.** The development of an open and listening culture in GwE is very marked. Headteachers and other stakeholders speak of GwE's flexibility, openness and responsiveness. There is a focus on "*relationships, relationships, relationships*". "*You can't do school improvement without getting the schools on board.*" The culture and the required behaviours are modelled by the leadership team in GwE. There is a focus on internal staff development and training to help to make sure that staff are engaged in a common vision and an agreed strategy. "*We are on a journey together and with our schools*". "*The culture in GwE used to be more top-down but now I feel listened to and that I am helping to shape the future*". Leadership is strategic, thoughtful, reflective, open to challenge and politically astute. "*Arwyn is committed to partnership working*". "*I have learned so much by being on the Leadership Team- the importance of being open, transparent, strategic and learning from each other*". "*This is a period of massive change but*

I feel confident that there is a coherent strategy going forward and that we are all on the same trajectory”

- 2. Peer engagement, clusters and peer review.** Significant progress is being made in the development of collective efficacy through school clusters. An important meeting involving head teachers from across the region on 22 January 2019 gave ownership to the heads to develop the principles for peer review and to agree a way forward for cluster-based work. This has enabled a fascinating trial to take place of two different approaches to peer review which both adhere to those principles: a) The Schools Partnership Programme approach run by Education Development Trust which provides a common structure, values the role of “Improvement Facilitators” and gives flexibility to each school to decide on the focus of the review and b) a more bottom-up localised approach which agrees a common focus for peer review across the cluster. Crucially, a baseline evaluation has been carried out to enable the effectiveness of the two different approaches to be considered over time.

There has also been an important shift in the development of the curriculum clusters, with schools developing their own plans, provided they meet certain criteria. The curriculum clusters have also had some success in the development and training of cluster facilitators which is helping system leadership to go beyond the head teacher. The ALN clusters, too, have made good progress since my visit last year.

The move towards more cluster-based working which builds in peer challenge and support and focuses on improving student outcomes is a very important step. Schools are enthusiastic about this approach. *“We own it but we get helpful support and challenge”*. They do understand that competition between schools for places presents a challenge to effective school to school collaboration, but they also realise that the national move to reduce the high stakes accountability system helps the collaboration to be more based on trust and transparency. Heads regard this move towards a more collaborative approach as very significant: *“We will look back and say ‘this is when it shifted’. It is a key moment in time for Wales”*.

The approach from GwE continues to be that schools need to lead this work with help and support from GwE rather than through an imposed top-down approach. But GwE aims to help to develop the culture and to provide the support to make it more likely to be effective so that the move toward peer review is “voluntary but inevitable”. In my view they have not yet reached a “tipping point” towards a self-improving system but they are on their way.

- 3. Reduced workload and bureaucracy.** This is a very demanding time for educators in Wales, as they attempt to implement the National Mission and shape it to meet their local context. Capacity and workload are, therefore, major concerns. The further development of the G6 instrument is having a very positive impact in reducing workload for schools and for SIAs. There is more work to do on this but with 84% of schools now choosing to use it, the informal evidence is that it is reducing headteacher workload considerably and also enabling SIAs to focus more on discussing ways forward and providing support to the school rather than spending time writing reports. *“I love it. It has saved me hours and hours of work” (head teacher). “The reports used to take me hours to write and I never really knew why I was writing them” (SIA)*. It is also encouraging transparency and supporting the distribution of leadership in schools. A win-win for the system. A protocol, how this is used going forward and who has access to the data, will be important. In addition, the new tracker is

helping to focus schools on the progress that groups of students are making and is thus supporting better professional dialogue on what should happen next.

Very effective professional support by performance, finance and data managers and their staff allow school improment staff to work more effectively. Identifying direction of travel and reporting to numerous audiences is made easier through quality information and reports provided by these staff.

4. **Scrutiny.** During my visit last year I highlighted a concern that the changes in the proposed accountability system with test results no longer aggregated and with Estyn no longer grading schools (except those in special measures) may lead to a problem with the expectations of elected members in their scrutiny role. This is already proving to be an issue and will need careful handling. However, I am encouraged to see a move towards scrutiny becoming more workshop-based, more about individual schools and more hands-on, with scrutiny members visiting schools and, indeed, shadowing the work of SIAs.
5. The provision of **differentiated and credible support** that is based on need. When I visited a year ago, GwE was already moving strongly in this direction. I am encouraged to see that good progress is being made on this, with even more serving secondary headteachers and experienced head teachers acting in the SIA role (thus giving the role enhanced credibility in the eyes of secondary heads), and an even more responsive and bespoke approach to meeting the needs of schools and local authorities. This focus on the use of practitioners rather than just on the expert at the centre is continuing to develop, with CPD increasingly being led by practitioners and with SIAs increasingly brokering access to good practice in other schools. The headteachers told me that this brokerage of good practice now includes a greater focus on dialogue and follow-up rather than just a one-off visit.
6. GwE plays an important role in helping to provide **coherence** to the various national policies and to help schools to make sense of them at local level. This is particularly the case for the ALN transformation work and also when it comes to support for the development of the curriculum for Wales, where there is still some current uncertainty in schools as to how much work should be done at this stage and how much should be left to later. The role that GwE plays as a conduit between government and schools is an important one -helping schools to understand government policy and keeping schools up-to-date with national developments, whilst also giving back constructive feedback to civil servants concerning the challenges on the ground.

Challenges/concerns

1. **Overlap and duplication between GwE and local authorities.** It is encouraging to see that there is a genuine partnership approach being developed between GwE and local authorities and that the relationship with local authorities is at least as good as it was last year, if not better. Roles are being clarified, relationships are being strengthened and effective ways of working are being developed. *“GwE’s role is support and challenge; the local authority’s role is accountability and statutory work”.*

The work that local authorities do on inclusion, well-being and on ALN does have potential overlap with the work that GwE does already or might do in the future. These overlap issues need further working through.

2. **Funding issues** continue to provide a challenge for the region. Some central GwE staff haven't been replaced and there has been a turnover of SIAs which has made continuity and the building of trust with schools more difficult (though, on the up-side, it has enabled new expertise to be brought into GwE). Schools too are struggling to do all that is expected of them while tight budgets are in place. Local authorities are also under pressure to continue to deliver services. These issues are not overwhelming but they do add additional challenges to be overcome to achieve success across the system.
3. **Recruitment and retention of leaders and teachers.** This remains a very big issue in many schools, in the secondary sector, smaller schools and especially Welsh medium. There are more small schools in North Wales than in other regions. The provision of high quality external support may not be enough to ensure that a challenging school makes progress if the school is struggling to attract quality leaders and subject teachers. The performance of secondary schools at key Stage Four remains an issue for GwE.

Recommendations.

GwE is heading in the right direction and now is not the time to change its fundamental approach or to dilute its strategy. More and more schools are on board, trust is being developed, capacity is being built, clusters are becoming more effective, peer review is about to take off and there is a positivity and enthusiasm that is clear to see. The leadership of GwE is evidently effective.

In the coming year there will need to be an even greater focus on teaching and learning and on the development of a vision for the curriculum that applies the principles of the Curriculum for Wales in the local context. GwE is best placed to lead the way on this, given its emphasis on cluster-based working and on facilitation of an increasingly self-improving system.

It is very encouraging that, in my view, progress has been made on all nine of the recommendations in my past report and I see no reason to amend those nine recommendations a year later. Sometimes the best approach is to continue to do what you have started to do but to do so in more depth and with some nuance. This is such a moment. The recommendations from last year all stand but now I would add the word "continue" to each of them and, in some cases, adapt them slightly.

1. Continue to have a gradual and differentiated approach to leading and supporting change. This will continue to be "messy" and schools' needs will be different. What is needed here is "nuanced leadership". SIAs may sometimes need to be deployed according to their strengths (eg those who are better at more direct intervention work being allocated to those schools requiring more direct intervention).
2. Continue to be clear about the bottom lines for intervention and continue to refuse to compromise when children are losing out on a good education. Don't lose the "hard-edge" and don't avoid the challenging conversation. But this should be the exception rather than the norm.
3. Continue to look to build on success and to share and disseminate it, through brokerage of school to school support and other ways to expose teachers and leaders to great

practice. The Formative Assessment Action Research Project can play an important part in this, as can the other cluster work. In particular, peer review can help significantly with this and this should, hopefully, come through as an outcome in the evaluations of peer review.

4. Continue to look out for highly talented teachers and leaders, using the cluster work and programmes like aspirant leaders to encourage people to step up. Perhaps consider the use of a talent development framework?
5. Continue to seek to use school-based staff increasingly in professional development. Find more ways to encourage and facilitate great practitioners to lead professional development at school and at cluster level. Consider ways in which this can be built more deeply into the culture of how schools and clusters operate.
6. Continue to focus clusters on transparent objectives based on outcomes for children. Be up-front about this and encourage the sharing of the proposed outcomes with local authorities, with Estyn and with parents. Do all that you can to support and develop “lateral leadership”, which is a different skill set from “institutional leadership”.
7. Continue to support the development and evaluation of a peer review strategy. Adopt a “test and learn” approach in the coming year
8. Develop greater clarity on the role of “system leader”. This links to the “lateral leadership” comment in 6. The time is right for more to be done on this in the coming year as cluster working moves to the next level.
9. Continue to look outward and to welcome challenge from those outside North Wales. The work with Shirley Clarke on formative assessment and with Education Development Trust on peer review, amongst others, shows the value of looking outward but it is important to contextualise things to meet the needs of schools in North Wales, as you are doing with the Formative Assessment Project and the Schools Partnership Programme.

Conclusion

I am, frankly, deeply encouraged by the progress I have observed a year after my last visit. My expectations have been met and in some cases exceeded. Now is not the time to lose your nerve but to renew your efforts and to tap into the undoubted excitement and enthusiasm that exists in schools. *“This is the best time that I can remember in all my years in education. I really feel that we can move things forward across Wales”*

Steve Munby 2 October 2019