
GWE JOINT COMMITTEE – 13/07/22

Present:

Councillors: Ieuan Williams (Isle of Anglesey County Council), Gill German (Denbighshire Council), Julie Fallon (Conwy County Borough Council), Ian Roberts (Flintshire Council), Phil Wynn (Wrexham County Borough Council), Beca Brown (Gwynedd Council).

Officers without a vote: Dr Lowri Brown (Conwy County Borough Council), Claire Homard (Flintshire Council), Garem Jackson (Gwynedd Council) and Rhys Howard Hughes (Isle of Anglesey County Council).

Officers present:

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

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

Denbighshire Council - Graham Boase (Chief Executive)

Present for item 11:

Sabel Wiliam –Audit Wales

Present for item 16:

Luned Fôn Jones – Audit Manager (Gwynedd Council)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Councillor Julie Fallon was elected as Chair of the Joint Committee for the year 2022-2023.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Gill German was elected as Vice-chair of the Joint Committee for the year 2022-2023.

3. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Karen Evans (Wrexham County Borough Council) and Geraint Davies (Denbighshire Council).

4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

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

5. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent matters were raised.

6. MINUTES

It was confirmed that the minutes presented from the previous meeting held on 16 February 2022 were correct.

7. GWE ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022

The report was presented by the Managing Director of GwE, and the following main points were noted:

- For clarity, it was noted that the content of the report derived from visits to schools, themes from business plans, discussions with the Management Board and Welsh Government priorities.
- It was stated that there were a number of positive aspects to be commended in the report such as
 - That effective collaboration had ensured appropriate support for schools during a very challenging period by maintaining ongoing contact.
 - A distance learning system was developed to comply with new challenges facing education in Wales.
 - GwE's website was proving very popular.
- It was explained that GwE and Bangor University worked closely together in relation to the 'Ein Llais Ni' project.
- It was recognised that GwE faced many challenges in the future such as:
 - Developing and growing a workforce over an extended period.
 - Developing leadership. The lockdown periods were a period of 'managing' rather than 'leading' in order to ensure safety and therefore it was necessary to ensure that leadership skills were again being developed.
 - Business matters such as a risk register, value for money and challenging performance, as well as a responsibility to develop school staff and the GwE workforce.
- Following a request for further information on specific topics, the Managing Director explained:
 - That there was a lot of enthusiasm from secondary schools in the east to be part of the 'Ein Llais Ni' project. There had to be an effective cascading process to ensure that the project was developed successfully. The Minister for Education had shown an interest in the project and was keen to share the project with other regions in order to adopt the project nationally.
 - Regular work was being done to ensure the well-being of pupils and staff. This work varied from one authority to another due to the different needs of the areas. Further work would be done in September at the level of individual schools.
 - Confidence to use the Welsh language had declined since the lockdown periods therefore work was being done to develop that confidence once again. There was a reduction in the number of pupils who chose to study the subject of 'Welsh' in their higher education and a turnover in a number of head positions. Work was being done jointly with Bangor University in order to encourage pupils to continue with their education in the Welsh language. Work was being done to ensure that a bilingual workforce was nurtured.
 - The relationship between carers/parents and the schools had been challenged in the lockdown periods. Work was being done to develop a package of resources to give parents guidance on the best methods of supporting children and young people.

RESOLVED

- To accept and approve the Annual Report for 2021-2022.

8. 2021-2022 GWE BUSINESS PLAN - QUARTER 4 MONITORING REPORT

The report was presented by the Assistant Director of GwE, confirming that the information reinforced the information shared in Item 7. Regional information would be shared in the county quality boards.

RESOLVED

- To approve the Report to monitor quarter 4 of the GwE Regional Business Plan 2021-2022.

9. 2021-2022 GWE ACCOUNTS - REVENUE OUT-TURN

The report was presented by the Host Authority's Head of Finance Department and the following main points were noted:

- Although a balanced budget had been set for the financial year, the situation at the end of the year showed an overspend of £230,128 for the financial year.
- The report showed that there was an underspend in some areas such as employees and transport. The main reasons for this were that many members of the workforce had been seconded to work on specific projects, as well as the lack of travel during the lockdown periods.
- There was an overspend on the GwE building as a result of a loss of income as people stopped renting rooms during the lockdown periods. This was also to be expected in the current financial year but the situation was expected to improve.
- It was explained that a decision had been taken during the year to spend a proportion of the money saved in the GwE reserve fund. Underspending in recent years had led to the reserve fund increasing significantly to £563,530 at the start of the financial year. The use of this money, together with the underspend in specific areas, had funded expenditure against the Specific Projects heading. A deliberate decision had been made to spend this money to ensure that schools continued to receive support during the lockdown periods.
- The committee was asked to approve a transfer from the GwE reserve to fund this expenditure. A balance of £437,503 would remain in the reserve fund.

In response to comments from the Chair, the following points were noted by the Managing Director of GwE:

- Conversations would be held with the Management Board when appropriate to consider the working arrangements of the workforce in the future. It was hoped that the majority of the GwE workforce would work in the office and/or out in the schools. Further discussions were needed on future working models.

RESOLVED

- To note and accept the Revenue Income and Expenditure Account for 2021-2022 submitted in Appendix 1 as the final financial position.
- To approve the financial transfer from the GwE reserve to fund an overspend of £230,128 in 2021-2022.

10. STATEMENT OF THE ACCOUNTS 2021-2022

The report was presented by the Host Authority's Head of Finance Department. It was noted that the statement followed a statutory format, and that it compared expenditure and income for the 2021-2022 financial year with the previous financial year (with adjustments where necessary to ensure that the comparison was a fair reflection of the situation). It was noted

that the Head of Finance Department had signed the draft statements on 30 May 2022, which was within the statutory deadline. The documents would be submitted to Audit Wales for inspection, and the final Statement and the auditors' report would be submitted to the 23 November 2022 meeting of the Joint Committee for approval.

RESOLVED

To receive and approve GwE's Statement of Accounts (subject to audit) for 2021-2022.

11. AUDIT WALES – GWE AUDIT PLAN 2022

The report was presented by a representative of Audit Wales and the following main points were noted:

- The plan sets out the work intended to be carried out in 2022.
- It was noted that the audit schedule might have to be reconsidered and that the officers would be in discussion with GwE should the need arise.

RESOLVED

To receive and approve the 2022 Audit Plan and commit to work towards achieving the statutory duties.

12. 2021-2022 GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

The report was presented by the Managing Director of GwE and the Host Authority's Head of Finance Department and the following main points were noted:

- It was explained that it was a statutory requirement for GwE to prepare a governance statement. It would be presented with the accounts after Audit Wales had completed its audit.
- Examples were shown of how GwE and schools in the region had already displayed success in following the seven principles.
- It was explained that this document was a living document, which changed constantly where appropriate, in order to reflect any challenges.

RESOLVED

To accept and approve the Annual Governance Statement for 2021-2022.

13. 2022-2023 GWE BUSINESS PLAN

The report was presented by the Managing Director of GwE, and the following main points were noted:

- There was a strong relationship between the annual report and the business plan. GwE's governmental and organisational objectives were used in order to establish main priorities for the year.
- It was explained that the priorities were set against the objectives and that detailed business plans were set and implemented to ensure that the objectives were met.
- It was noted that LAs could also add relevant matters at county level to their business plans.
- It was noted that updates on these matters would be regularly reported to this committee and to county scrutiny meetings. Operational issues would also be discussed in the County Quality Boards.

RESOLVED

To approve the GwE Regional Business Plan for 2022-2023.

14. RISK REGISTER

The report was presented by the Managing Director of GwE, and the following main points were noted:

- It was noted that several risks had been amended within this living document.
- It was declared that one of the biggest risks for the coming years was the budget and inflation, especially as GwE's budget had fallen by 22% in recent years.
- Several other risks for the next year were discussed such as:
 - The impacts of the lockdown periods and workload
 - Individuals' skills
 - A willingness to embrace the new curriculum
 - Uncertainty with regard to accountability/performance challenge measures and how national accountability impaired local requirements
 - Cuts to school budgets.

RESOLVED

To note and accept the contents of the report.

15. SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT GUIDELINES: FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION, IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The report was presented by the Assistant Director of GwE, and the following main points were noted:

- It was explained that these guidelines had been published following the scrapping of the school categorisation system. It was currently a non-statutory system but was expected to become statutory by September 2024. Despite this, schools were expected to attempt to adopt the guidelines as soon as possible.
- It was noted that the main aspects of the guidelines were:
 - Governing bodies had to ensure that a summary copy of their school development plan was available through the School Governors' Annual Report. In order to help increase confidence in and commitment to the school and its development plan, the school should publish the summary copy on its website. The summary should be written in language that is easy for parents, carers and learners to understand.
 - A page-long overview of the school's self-evaluation conclusions/findings also had to be provided, conveying the school's main strengths and areas for development. It was expected to include high-level improvement priorities; planned actions to achieve those priorities; and relevant milestones.
 - The governing body needed to show all the external support the school had received in that financial year (including GwE support).
 - The governing bodies would report on progress against the previous year's priorities.
 - GwE and the Local Authority had to maintain a professional dialogue with the governing body in order to discuss self-evaluation processes, the school's strengths and any other issue that the governing body needed to be aware of and monitor.
 - The governing body had to receive a report on how support would be maintained.

In response to observations, the Managing Director noted:

- That he recognised that these guidelines had been introduced at a very challenging time as schools were still coping with COVID-19 issues as well as all the activity at the end of an academic year. Although schools were concerned that it would not be possible to achieve these guidelines by the end of the academic year, the Managing Director was confident that the schools would be able to act on the guidelines early in the autumn term in order to ensure that, by the end of the next academic year, the schools would have committed to the guidelines efficiently and successfully.
- This would give schools time to get used to these guidelines before they became statutory and would also provide time to evaluate the work in order to be able to attempt to solve the problems that arose from the guidelines before they became statutory in September 2024.

RESOLVED

To note and accept the contents of the report.

16. THE INTERNAL AUDIT CHARTER AND INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN FOR 2022-2023

The report was presented by the Audit Manager of Gwynedd Council, and the following main points were noted:

- It was explained that having an internal audit gave the citizen confidence on governance issues. For it to work effectively, an internal audit charter had to be created. The internal audit report would be published at the end of the financial year but if major failures arose before then, those would be highlighted by the auditors to the Managing Director before the end of the financial year.
- The main areas to be audited were:
 - o Training
 - o Staff Recruitment and Retention Arrangements - with a succession plan, with multi-location working
 - o Absence Management - 26% of employers cite long COVID as the main reason for long-term absence

RESOLVED

To approve the Internal Audit Charter and Internal Audit Plan for 2022-2023.

The meeting commenced at 1.30 p.m. and concluded at 3.15 p.m.

CHAIR